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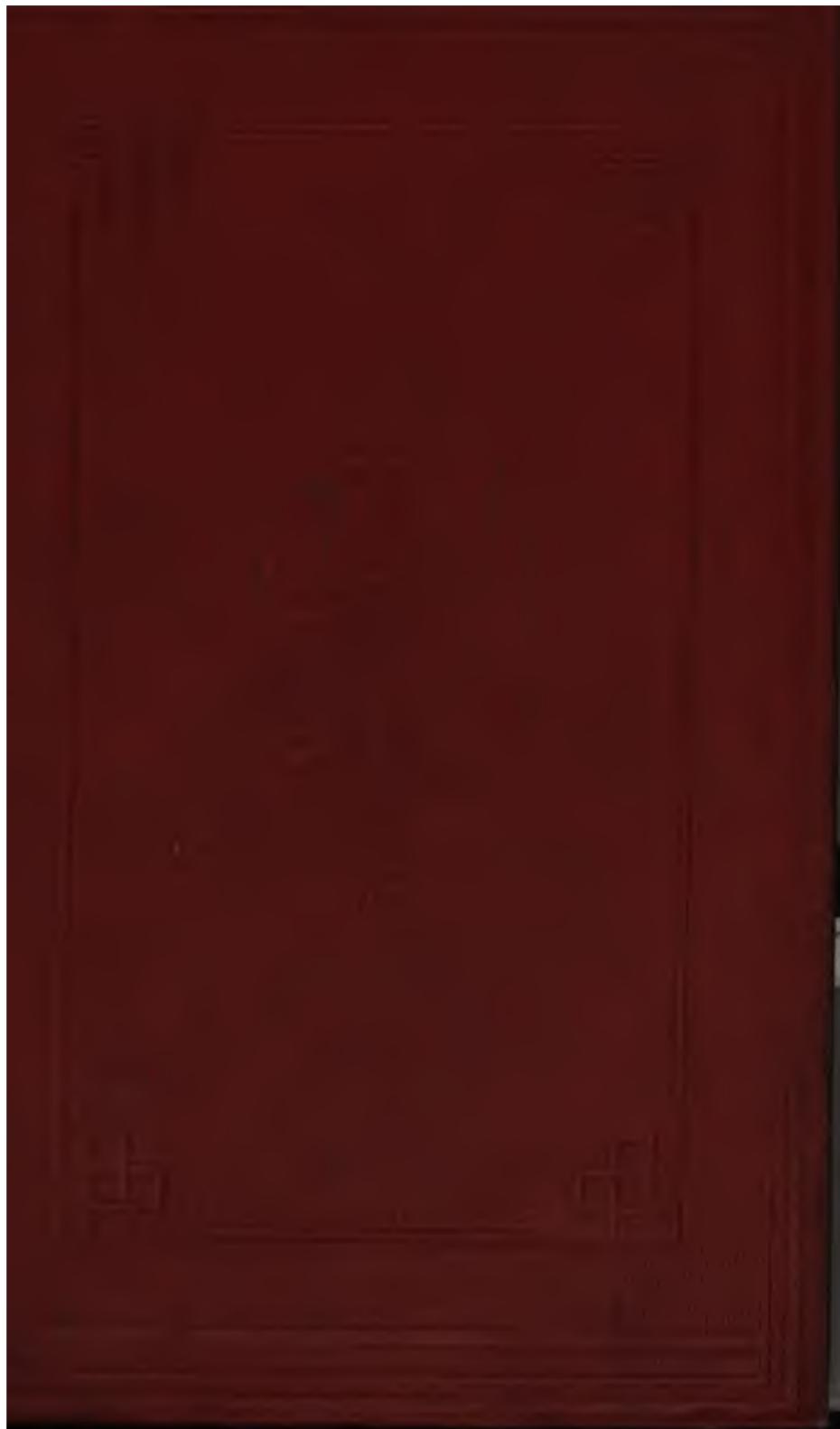
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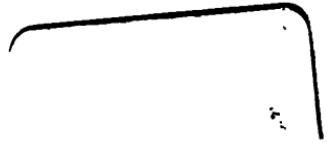
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LOVED AT LAST.

A Story.

BY

MARK LEMON,

AUTHOR OF "WAIT FOR THE END," ETC

" Not at first sight, nor with a dribbing shot,
Love gave the wound, which while I breathe will bleed
But known worth did in tract of time proceed,
Till by degrees it had full conquest got.
I saw and liked, I liked but loved not ;
I loved, but did not straight what love decreed.

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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LOVED AT LAST.

CHAPTER I.

“THE WHIRLIGIG OF TIME” BEGINS TO “BRING ABOUT ITS REVENGES.”—SALLY STERKINS RECEIVES AND GIVES WARNING.

FIVE years had passed and brought their changes. Mrs. Masham had taken a small house in one of the suburbs of London, to be near her daughter Ruth, but made her visits with such moderation that her presence was always welcome to Frank, who pronounced her to be a model mother-in-law, never intruding meddlesome advice, or endeavouring to retain a dictatorship which should always terminate with the nuptial

benediction. There were times when poor Mrs. Masham felt lonely enough, sitting the long day through in her little parlour with no other companionship than her book or needle. The remembrance of old days, with their busy tasks and anxious sorrows, would come back to her, so softened by time that they begat momentary regrets they were hers no longer, until the knowledge of Ruth's happier lot scared them away, and left only thankfulness for the good which had befallen her and her child.

Mrs. Lockyer, despite her liking for Ruth's mother, could not forget the Rosebush, and admit Mrs. Masham to the equality which is necessary to perfect friendship; and though daughter-in-law Ruth had won her way to her heart, sister-in-law was only received with a becoming courtesy which did not encourage any great intimacy. And therefore Mrs. Masham felt at times rather lonely, her thoughts now and then wandering away to a certain village schoolhouse and much that it contained.

- Mr. Wycherly had grown ambitious and money-getting, for a new railroad was in course of formation through the Old Court land, and he had become a large shareholder and director, the latter position compelling frequent journeys to London, and producing occasional visits from surveyors, engineers, and contractors.

The new life at Old Court appeared to be quite as acceptable to Kate as to her father, possibly because it made occupation for time which would have otherwise been wearisome to Mr. Wycherly, and consequently have made greater demands upon her own powers of entertainment; the more especially as she had conceived a distaste for those out-door pursuits which had once rendered their companionship almost constant. Kate therefore entered earnestly into Wycherly's calculations and projects, and rather surprised the railway gentlemen at her father's table by her knowledge of their plans, and by the interest which she took in gradients, levels, cuttings, and embankments, topics which a few

years ago formed the staple of conversation at many a dinner-table besides that at Old Court. So much, indeed, did such matters appear to engage her attention that her small circle of country friends grew more contracted every day, as one after another of them experienced the absence of that complimentary attention which is necessary to prevent estrangement in mere visiting acquaintances.

Kate was so occupied with her father's letters and other business matters that even Ruth was neglected, and had that gentle friend been punctilious as to the order of writing, their correspondence would have been brief indeed. At times Kate accompanied her father on his business trips to London, where he had chambers; but she often returned without having seen Ruth, whose home was out of the smoke of the metropolis, and who would have been sadly disturbed had she been aware of her friend's visits to town. Frank Lockyer however generally knew when the Wycherlys were in London, and from him Kate

heard of the happiness of Ruth, and by him conveyed the assurance of her continued friendship.

For some reason or other those messages were forgotten.

There were hours—long weary hours—when Kate was alone, unoccupied except by her own reflections, and then she would remain in her room long hours together, sometimes sitting at her window, her head resting on her hand, apparently seeing in a trance some saddening spectacle, until her face was full of sorrow. At other times she would clasp her hands and pace about the room, her eyes looking down into the past, rarely upward to the future, as one so young and loved should have done, and seen only an unclouded sky. Whatever was the grief which had taken possession of her soul, none knew it—not even Ruth.

Kate still loved Ruth, more dearly now perhaps than ever; but there had come a change upon her own life which made her thoughts too solemn for idle words, too full of hopelessness to be con-

fessed to one who was so happy as she believed her loving Ruth to be. Therefore she shut them up in her own heart, nor allowed them to go free except when she was alone, so that none might question her concerning them, or even surmise that she had such terrible companions for her solitude. They were only known, she thought, to God and to herself.

Kate rarely left Old Court, except to go among her poorer neighbours and perform those kindly services which had been part of her daily life from her childhood. She did not affect to be a *Lady Bountiful*, but she had learned how much good could be achieved by gentle words and a show of kindly sympathies added to the smallest help properly applied. Jim Perks had had his share of her good offices, and once more earned honest bread in his native village. What if the experiences gained in the exercise of such Christian duties should prove the sweetest solace for her own troubled spirit ? Let her wait and "pray and faint not."

There were changes also in Suburban Square. From the time of Cecil's departure a pale and grief-worn woman had wandered from room to room in that ill-starred house, remaining longer in one which had been her son's bedchamber than in any other, and so continued to do until she wore her life away.

A rustling on the stairs—the heavy tread of men upon the stairs, heard in the darkened room where Clara Hartley sat apart from her stony-hearted father, told that the angel of death had passed through the house and done its work of mercy. The rain fell heavily, and the gusty wind dashed it about when the men bore their burthen forth into the street; but Clara knew that her mother was at rest, and that the storms which had shattered her peace would touch her no more.

Clara Hartley was scarcely fifteen when taken from school to keep her father's house and be the only guardian of her stricken mother, whose counterpart she was in her submissive character and

loving nature. The disgrace which had fallen upon her brother, and the terrible infliction which had clouded her mother's reason, made the poor girl thoughtful and womanly, at the sacrifice of that light-heartedness which is the rightful inheritance of youth. For Cecil she retained the most devoted affection, acquitting him of all evil intention in the error he had committed, and counting almost every hour which remained of his cruel sentence. She had been forbidden to write to him, and was indeed assured that any such communication was not permitted by the law of the land. Her father had told her this, and she was unable to judge him rightly, as no one had been willing to acquaint her with his wicked abandonment of Cecil, and therefore she, as her mother had done, served and obeyed him from a sense of duty, hardly from the prompting of filial love.

A strange feeling of loneliness which possessed her after her mother's death, added to an increasing fear of her father, produced for some

time a timidity of manner which would have been regarded with pain by any other parent than Selwyn Hartley. He was rather gratified however by her ready obedience and devotion, never failing to keep both in exercise. But we are anticipating.

"Well, Clara," said Hartley on his return from the funeral of his wife, "that business is over. Pull up those back-window blinds if the front ones must continue in mourning. We have seen the last of your poor mother, Clara, and a happy release we ought to consider it, my dear."

"Her life was indeed a sad one," replied Clara.

"Yes, it was certainly a very sad one, and all her own making, that's my comfort," said Hartley; "would fret herself at all times about trifles—family trifles particularly, and always neglected me for the sake of others. A pretty mess she made of it. However, this is not a day to remember her faults, though I've suffered very severely from them—very."

"Indeed," said Clara, with great surprise in her look.

"Yes, she and Cecil ; that affair of his has lost me nearly all my private connection, and might have affected me commercially. However, that's nothing to you ; you don't care for company, and I can get as much as I want—at the warehouse. You'll have dinner punctually at five ; Bosbury's taken the mourning coach on to the City in order to be back in time. It's rather odd that my two partners are about the only friends I have, except clients, and they always conclude their conviviality by asking for advances."

Not in the least odd, Mr. Hartley, that all decent-minded men and women who know your story should avoid you as some loathsome thing that crawls about the world exciting wonder by its hideousness. Has not your son—your only son—stood trial like a common thief, and been taken from the comfort of his home and friends to the hulks, there to herd with hardened brutal men, to wear the convict's livery, and do the work of a

galley-slave, when you could have saved him, and would not? You still walk with your hands in your pockets and "stare the world in the face," you say. Do you? No: your eyes blink under the gaze of an honest man; your head bows as fathers, brothers, scorn you when they pass by. Your hands twitch in your pockets and the hot blood mounts into your face when old acquaintance cross out of your path, declining to own fellowship with such: "a commercial Brutus." You are certain that men despise you, and you would now give half you are worth if it could buy back the past and Cecil could be saved by you; but, knowing that to be impossible, you continue to harden your heart against him, cursing him as the cause of your own wickedness, and striving to believe in the delusion. Bad husband! bad father! you must live out your days.

The sad young housekeeper in Suburban Square led a lonely life indeed, as Clara was forbidden to form any companionship apart from her father's

friends, and they, alas ! were limited, as he had said, to his partners and their families. Clara had one faithful devoted friend, however, in Sally Sterkins, who, for the love she bore to Mrs. Hartley's memory, watched over her child with the anxiety of a mother.

Sally Sterkins was only a domestic servant, who had lived with the Hartleys from the time they had set up housekeeping, and long before they had arrived at the dignity of Suburban Square, even when they "kept but one, and did their washing at home." Sally was rather an oddity, and had become so incorporated into the family that she really believed herself at times to be a relation, although she could not define her affinity. She was in consequence very outspoken and rude occasionally; but as her kindness of heart and faithfulness of service were known to Mrs. Hartley, Sally had rarely been reproved by her indulgent mistress. Now that Clara had succeeded to the keys and other responsibilities of the house, Sally felt her own importance increased, and although

she fully acknowledged the supremacy of Clara, she rendered suit and service rather rudely at times, as though she considered she was conferring an obligation and not performing a duty.

As cab-drivers, coachmen, grooms, and other divers persons who live much out of doors, are accustomed to measure distances and recall facts by association with the signs of public-houses—as, “Well, it’s half a mile from the Royal Oak,” or “I met him just this side of the Rodney Arms,”—so, Sally Sterkins, who rarely migrated from her kitchen into the upper world outside of it, usually dated all her recollections of interesting or important events by what she had cooked for dinner on the day of their occurrence; and this peculiarity remained with her until the end, her last moments being occupied in recalling the “funeral baked” and other “meats” which she had prepared on the occasions of the Hartley obsequies during her long period of service.

When Clara assumed the reins of government, Sally was in good health and spirits, with many years of useful life before her, and earnestly desirous of "doing her best for the child she had nursed when pap and dillwater was its daily bread."

The young housekeeper stood in need of instruction, and Sally gave it freely.

"Miss Clara, my dear miss," Sally would say, "you are not aware perhaps, but this is preserving time, and jams and fruits made at home is cheaper in the end than the rubbish bought in shops. Not that we have preserved or jammed of late years, on account of your dear ma's health and speerits and limited sugar ; but I do remember when we kept at it for two days, having cold line of veal and gooseberry pudding, master being away at the time ; and six dozen of red and four dozen of black, principally for children's powders, of which a many was taken, was the jams, whilst the preserves was more than I remember ; but damsons and arlines was long plentiful in this

house, change and change about, and only one pot mouldy."

At other times she would discourse upon washing bills, and the iniquities of laundresses ; narrate terrific anecdotes of short-weight butchers and bakers, opening Clara's eyes (as Sally said) "to the wickedness which came down their arey steps every day." Again, Sally would recall many incidents connected with Mrs. Hartley's sorrows, the death of children, and the grief that came into the house ; and Clara did not fail to remark that in all those sad narratives her father was never mentioned as having borne his part.

"I remember, when Master Robert died, we had broiled mackerel and a saddle of mutton at five ; he was a fair child with dark hazel eyes, ailing from the month ; your poor mother would not believe that he was gone, but sat by his bed-side until past eleven ; and master laughed at her for a fool, and made a riot at me because the mutton was overdone, as it was, I don't deny."

"And was my father always so indifferent to the loss of his children?" asked Clara, sadly.

"My dear Miss Clara, as you ask the question I will answer truly," replied Sally; and then she proceeded to enumerate all the occasions when death had visited the household (assigning to each its proper joint and accessories), and always recording some instance of Hartley's selfishness and indifference. Clara could now account for much which had been conjecture, and discovered the cause of her mother's tears, which had often wetted her cradle pillow.

"And my brother Cecil," she asked. "Was he so very wicked?"

"Wicked, Miss Clara!" cried Sally; and then, looking up to the ceiling of the room, she continued in a tone of earnest solemnity:—"If ever there was a martyred saint in Smiffield, that saint was your poor brother Cecil! If ever there was a ogre as eat his own flesh and blood, that ogre was your father!"

Sally then told Clara, in her own peculiar manner, Cecil's unhappy story, and when she had ended her recital, mistress and servant were both weeping bitterly.

The few household loves which had abided in Hartley's home fled when his wife was taken from it. He was one of those secret assassins of whom the law does not take cognizance, one of those who, by unkind acts and words to be accounted for when all will answer at the judgment, destroy, slowly but surely, the lives committed to their care. Selfish and stony-hearted as he was, his sins began to find him out, and he was at times painfully conscious of the isolation in which he had placed himself. Not that he repented of the evil which he had done ; on the contrary, he excused himself by accusing Cecil as the cause, and continued to harden his heart against his son. He grew more petulant and morose, and having nothing else to care for, he came to love his money, which he now husbanded almost parsimoniously.

One day, shortly after Sally's revelations, he said to Clara :—

"I have been looking into your housekeeping book, and I think we spend a great deal too much money. You've plenty of time on your hands, and should be glad to employ it to keep you out of mischief. I shall therefore shut up some of the rooms, and manage to do with one good servant and an occasional charwoman, as we used to do before we came here."

Clara stood in too much awe of him to offer any remonstrance.

"So old Sally had better have warning at once——"

"Sally!" exclaimed Clara, "surely you would not send her away? She has been with us so long!"

"That's the reason she should go. She'll soon be getting too old for work, and expecting a pension or something of that sort. She's behaved herself pretty well since she's been with us, so you can give her a couple of months instead of the usual. Now no whimpering; I had enough of that during

your mother's time, and I won't have any more of it. Do you hear? When I'm off to the City, have her up and tell her what I've said if you like."

Clara did whimper long after he had gone, and long before she could summon the faithful old domestic to tell her how her good service was to be rewarded.

Poor Sally was, naturally enough, astounded at the information, and it was some time before she could comprehend the calamity which had overtaken her.

"I've got to go, Miss Clara?" she asked. "Me! that's wore out my youthful days in his service?"

"It is too true, Sally," replied Clara, her tears telling how much she was grieved at the separation.

"Well, then, it's downright cruel," said Sally; "but he always was a bitter cruel man, even to his poor wife and children;" and she dried her eyes with her apron, and accepted her fate with dignity.

"I wish I could prevent your going, but I——"

" You're nobody, my dear child, I know it; no more was your poor mother," interrupted Sally ; " but it serves me right perhaps. It's a judgment for speaking against him who has paid my wages, beer money, and washing for a matter of three-and-twenty year."

" Do not reproach yourself for what you have told me," said Clara, " or I shall be more unhappy than I am."

" I won't, I don't, Miss Clara," replied Sally, " and you shall see I don't. If it wasn't for you I don't think I should care about going, for the place ain't like the same place since poor missus died. I ain't without friends and I ain't without a penny, for missus was always very good to me." She paused, and appeared to be reflecting before she spoke again. " Miss Clara, I have something upon my mind which must come out now that I am going to leave you. I should have told you on it some day, when you was grown older ; but as I am going to leave here I don't know what might happen. Master might not let me call

and see you, and then I might go to live with strangers, and die perhaps sudden, or a hundred other things."

"What do you mean?" asked Clara, a vague notion of some more painful revelations oppressing her.

"I'll sit down, miss, if you please, for what you have told me has shaken me a little. I'll sit here on missus' chair, where she sat when she sent for me, after taking her arrowroot and dry toast. You know that missus had what she called her 'lucids' at times and when she was quite herself, remembering everything that had happened years ago, though not in a way I remembers them. Well, you may be sure when she was so she always talked about Mr. Cecil and when he would come home again, and wondering what he would do and all that. On this day she says, 'Sally, you have been more a friend than a servant in this family for many a long day, and now I believe you are the only true one that me and my poor boy has. His sister is too young to know

how good he was and how wicked his father has behaved to him. When he comes back I shall be dead. Yes—she seemed to know she was dying—‘and perhaps his father’s doors may be shut again him. If I did not think that would be the case he should never know what I have known for many years, but it may help to make his father show him more mercy than he has done in time gone by, and force him to treat him like a son.’ Saying of this, she gave me a large letter tied round with ribbon, and a large seal to it. Then she says, ‘Should his father shut his door in his face, you must try and see Mr. Cecil and give him that letter; but should his father behave kind, put it in the fire without opening it.’ Now then, Miss Clara, that letter I shall give to you for your brother, and for his sake mind you never part with it to anybody but him; or stay—yes—she told me that if I could not see Mr. Cecil I was to find out Mr. Perks—he used to come here once—and give it to him for his young master, as he would be sure to know where to find him.”

Sally left the room to procure this mysterious letter, returning with it in a few moments.

The letter was secured and sealed as Sally had described it, and on it was written "For my dear son, Cecil."

"Whatever is inside of it I don't know, of course, my dear," said Sally, "but it's been hid away in my best work-box at the bottom of the copper, which biled its last round of beef nigh four year ago, knowing how curious master is, and prying into servants' boxes when out for the day."

Clara's hand trembled as she received the letter, and recognised the writing of her mother, feeling as though a message from the dead had been confided to her care.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST TROUBLE OF RUTH'S MARRIED LIFE,
AND WHICH SHE CONFIDES TO KATE, WHO
IN RETURN KEEPS HER OWN SECRET.

PUNCTUALLY at half-past four in the afternoon the neatest of broughams might be seen proceeding along Pall Mall, thence down the Strand, continuing eastward through Temple Bar. If the weather was fine its occupants were Ruth and her little son Bernard on their way to meet Frank Lockyer when the business of the day was over.

Ruth's married life had been very happy, made so by the unceasing kindness of her husband, and never for a moment had she suspected that his love was not equal to her own. Frank had resolved that she should be so deceived, and for

a time he kept such careful watch and ward over himself that his mother, who suspected, if she did not know, the sacrifice he had made, came to believe that he had learned to love his pretty, gentle wife. Such a consummation might have been, but for a reason which will disclose itself ere long.

For little Bernard, Frank's love was almost idolatry. He appeared to lavish upon the child all the devotion of his affectionate nature, which should have been given in part at least to Ruth his wife. As day by day some new intelligence displayed itself, some wondrous development of baby knowledge, the increasing admiration of the father found utterance in expressions which would have sounded absurdly to any other listener than the mother, to whose ears his words were as sweetest music. Frank was conscious of this inordinate love for his child, and encouraged it freely, hoping thereby to fill the void in his heart to the exclusion of any other less holy passion.

So passed the three first years of Ruth and Frank's wedded lives. And then came occasions when Ruth's City journeyings were interdicted for two or three days together, and at those times Frank appeared restless and excited, not dining at home as was his usual wont, but returning late without explaining the cause of his absence. Ruth questioned him only with her anxious eyes; but as he made no answer, she believed it was her duty to be silent also, overcoming her desire to learn the cause of his disquietude in order that she might share it with him. The child was her great ally in restoring her husband to his accustomed cheerfulness, and she had seen the dark hour pass away from him when [she placed the little conqueror on his father's knee, and even felt rejoiced to know there was an influence superior to her own.

These perplexing visitations were rarely of more than two or three days' duration, and Ruth attributed them to the anxieties of Frank's increasing business, which had prospered so

surprisingly through the energy and industry of Frank that Mr. Bland had fully condoned the great commercial offence of which Frank had been guilty, and which had nearly occasioned a separation from his more experienced partner.

During one of those dark days Ruth received a note from Kate Wycherly which surprised her almost as much as it gave her pain.

The letter was dated from Mr. Wycherly's chambers in London, and was as follows :—

“ I think it unkind, my dear Ruth, that you have not called to see me any time when I have been in town of late, although I own I have been neglectful in not writing to you ; but, as your husband has been my messenger, I thought you would have waived ceremony with your old friend and come at once to see me. I would have called on you, but I am, as you know, chief clerk or secretary, or what else you please, to my father, and he has now so much business on

his hands—more than I think is at all good for him, that I am afraid to absent myself. We return home, I believe, to-morrow; so be charitable and forgiving, and let me see you."

There was more in the letter—love to the darling Bernard, and some affectionate references to herself, but Ruth passed over them hastily to reperuse more than once the portion of the letter we have transcribed. "Kate Wycherly in town and her arrival known to Frank. Messages sent by Frank and of which she had never heard. What was the meaning of this reticence?" She read Kate's note again, and fancied that she had discovered the key to the mystery. "My father has now so much business on his hands,—more than I think is at all good for him." Yes, and Frank had been induced to join in some of Wycherly's speculations, and feared to trust his foolish Ruth with the anxieties his ventures had entailed. She would go at once to Kate; so ordering her brougham she was driven towards

Temple Bar, although it was one of the days of interdiction.

The two friends had not met for some time—nearly a year—and Ruth was almost startled, to observe the change which had taken place in her beloved Kate. There was the old sweet smile for a moment on her lips, and then it faded to one so sad that it might have been born of a heartache. There was the old sweet music in her voice when she first greeted Ruth, but after a time the music changed to the mournful tones of an *Aeolian* harp stirred by the sighing of the wind.

Kate saw instantly the impression she had made on the mind of her friend, and strove to remove it by an affectation of cheerfulness which was hardly more satisfactory to Ruth.

"How much you are improved—how well and happy you seem, dear Ruth," said Kate, looking tenderly at her friend. "I think we were all very clever to secure you such a good kind husband as Mr. Lockyer."

"I am happy—very happy," replied Ruth, "and

owe all to my dear, good husband, who never since we have been married has caused me a moment's pain"—adding, after a pause,—"until of late."

"Of late?" asked Kate, with some animation of manner."

"Yes, dear; and I was so glad to get your note—so very glad; for I fancy you may explain in some way the cause of my husband's anxieties, and consequently of mine."

"You must explain yourself then, dear," replied Kate, looking more earnestly at Ruth.

"You say in your note that you have sent me messages by Frank to call upon you," said Ruth.

"Yes, on each occasion when we have been in London," replied Ruth.

"On each occasion? Have you been in town more than once?" asked Ruth, colouring slightly.

"Yes, three times since Christmas; but our stay was only for a day or two," replied Kate,

colouring in her turn. "Did not Mr. Lockyer tell you this?—we always saw him."

"No, Kate, he did not; and it was that concealment which gave me so much pain—so much anxiety when I read your note."

Both friends remained silent for some time, Ruth looking sad and perplexed, whilst a dark cloud gathered over the face of Kate, who was the first to break the silence.

"Why did Mr. Lockyer not deliver my message, Ruth? He always made some excuse for not bringing you with him—why?" asked Kate, curtly.

"You can better answer that question I fancy," replied Ruth,—"if, as I have suspected, Frank has entered into some of your father's speculations and feared to make them known to me, his silly wife. Perhaps I ought not to ask if this be the case; but at times he is so evidently disturbed by some secret anxiety that I am made wretched by my conjectures as to the cause."

The dark cloud upon Kate's face came and

passed—came and passed again—before she replied to Ruth.

“I am not acquainted with all my father’s business matters, and he may have had some speculation affair with your husband and not have mentioned it to me, thinking perhaps that in some hour of chat like this I might entrust you with more than Mr. Lockyer wished you to know. I would, if I were you, Ruth, let my husband keep his secret if he desire to do so. I would be content with my household duties—I won’t call them cares—and leave the strong men to do their own work.”

“Yes,” said Ruth, thoughtfully, “it is better, perhaps, that I should not seek to know what my husband desires to conceal from me. Yes, I think that will be my better course.”

“I am sure of it; at least—” Kate paused in her reply, and the dark cloud upon her face came and went again. Whatever was the cause, she kept it a secret from her friend, and turned the conversation to subjects of lighter interest, making

Ruth eloquent on the accomplishments of her boy, who was, of course, a paragon. Who would deprive any mother of such a belief? Not Kate Wycherly. Ruth however checked herself in the full flow of her lavish praises, and laughing, promised to talk no more about Bernard if Kate would ride with her to call on Mrs. Masham, promising to send Kate home again before the return of Mr. Wycherly.

The proposal was accepted and the call made, to the great delight of lonely Mrs. Masham, who detained her visitors so long that Ruth had not time before her dinner hour to accompany Kate to her lodgings, and therefore she arranged to walk home—some half a mile—whilst Kate was driven back in the brougham.

When Ruth arrived at the end of the street where her house was, she saw preceding her, her husband. His head was bent down and his step was slow and hesitating. When he reached his own door he paused and glanced upwards as though to see if he had been observed. Again his

head bent down, and he turned as though to retrace his steps, fearing as it seemed to cross his own threshold — held back by some secret grief which he would not willingly bear home to Ruth, not knowing how sharp a pain he had sent to her loving heart by what she had already witnessed. He crossed the road without seeing her, and turned into an adjoining square, Ruth following him with her tearful eyes, and wondering why he fled from her who should have been his comforter. What a relief it would have been to have followed him—to have thrown her arms around his neck and prayed him to confide in her, and not to bear alone this unknown, this unguessed sorrow! She would tell him what she had seen, what she had felt on seeing it, and perhaps he would unloden his heavy heart, and permit her to bear her proper share of the burthen.

When she knocked at the door, little Bernard run down the stairs, thinking it was his papa come home.

"Where is papa, mamma? The long hand has passed the place when he comes home!"

She could not answer the boy, but pressed his face to her own, kissed him, and hurried to her room as though some terrible calamity had overtaken them—father, mother, child. What shadow had come into her happy home, chilling her blood, terrifying her senses, alarming her love! Why did she desire so much to call Bernard to her, and yet hesitated to do so, fearing that he might again inquire "Where's papa?" and she have no answer but "Gone away from our door—gone away, dear child, in sorrow from us both,—from us who love him so very dearly."

Frank's struggle had been sharp and decisive. He had shut up the enemy of his peace—whatever it was—shut it away in his heart, perhaps, and thought himself secure for a time at least.

He knocked at the door with a free hand. The sound was only that of iron beaten upon iron, without harmonies or cadences; but it was like music to the ear of Ruth, telling her that

her husband had come home to her, and had not carried his sorrow into the solitude of the streets, where none would care for him—no, not one.

She heard him as he came upstairs, cheerily calling to Bernard, who chided him in return.

“Naughty papa! look where the long hand is upon the clock.”

“Yes, I am late, and mamma will scold me for keeping dinner waiting. Not much, I hope, dear,” he added, calling to Ruth from his dressing-room, “as I believe that mamma is not dressed. Berny, run and see.”

Poor Ruth’s heart beat so quickly at these pleasant sounds that she could make no answer but a spasmodic gasp that sounded like “Yes,” and with that reply Bernard scampered back again to naughty papa; whilst Ruth, with a rapidity worthy of imitation by all ladies who are dressing late for dinner, completed her simple *toilette*, and was ready in the drawing-room to receive her husband, answering the smile upon his face with

one of her prettiest, until the kiss which she gave him destroyed some of its symmetry.

Master Bernard Lockyer was a privileged person, whom strong-minded mammas would have called "a spoilt boy," and he was frequently permitted a chair at the dinner-table long before the period of dessert. He was generally very good, and rarely coveted anything (jam tart excepted) until the proper moment, and though his observations were at times rather obtrusive and irrelevant, his place at table might have been occupied by a less agreeable companion—say, for instance, a scientific bore, a commonplace politician, or a philological windbag. Upon the present occasion his company was very acceptable, as it enabled Frank and Ruth to avoid a relapse into the anxious thoughts which had recently possessed them, and both were conscious of some approaching embarrassment when the little fellow had been led away to bed by his nurse.

Frank then lighted his cigar, as he was permitted to smoke in the dining-room after dinner.

Ruth had made this concession gracefully and cheerfully, as she was of those who valued her husband's society more than her curtains, and thought that the bread-winner had a right to select his own form of relaxation and enjoyment. A wife had better present him with a cigar than a latch-key.

"Whom do you think I have seen to-day?" Ruth said, after a brief silence. "Kate Wycherly."

"Indeed!" replied Frank, taking a long pull at his cigar. He knew that she had visited her old friend, as he had been told when he called at Wycherly's chambers in the afternoon that Miss Kate had gone for a drive with Mrs. Lockyer; and yet he thought proper to appear ignorant of that circumstance.

"Yes!" continued Ruth, "and we had a long chat and a ride together. No thanks to you, you naughty fellow!" She rose, and then seated herself on a footstool beside his knee.

Frank was conscious of the non-delivery of Kate's several messages, but he replied :—

"Why do you say that?"

Ruth then produced the note which she had received in the morning, and having spread it out on her husband's knee gave it to him to read. Frank held the note between him and his wife's face as he read what Kate had written, and it was well that he did so, as there were changes of expression on his own which Ruth might have read also, and to her disquiet.

"Now, sir," said Ruth, taking back her note, "what have you to say for yourself? Why have you never delivered Kate's invitation, or told me when she was in town?"

"Well," replied Frank, his cigar requiring two or three resuscitating puffs at the time, "I really can hardly explain to you why those messages were not delivered."

"Try, sir," said Ruth, clasping the hand which held the cigar, and thereby depriving Frank of any excuse for longer silence.

"Well then, my dear Ruth, although it may perhaps give you a little pain to hear it, this was

my chief reason." He released his hand and took a long pull at his cigar. "Mr. Wycherly, you know, is a very peculiar man ; his prejudices and his dislikes are very strong and enduring, and although he has many good qualities—a great many—he is singularly unforgiving."

"Surely I have not offended him ?" asked Ruth.

"No, my dear child ; how could that be possible ?" replied Frank smiling. "No, but I know how great is your regard still—and so is mine—for poor Cecil, and Wycherly, I am sorry to say, never speaks of that poor fellow without causing me the greatest pain——"

True, quite true ; but Wycherly had mentioned his name to Frank but twice since Cecil had received his sentence.

—"And therefore, knowing what you would suffer—how keenly you would feel what I must characterise as unkindness,—I had resolved not to expose you to the chance of an exhibition of this inexcusable animosity to one we both esteem."

What a bungling speech! There are many men who can tell a lie without winking, and who appear to have such a dislike to speaking the truth that they prefer to lie when an honest statement would have better served even the purpose of the moment. There are others who cannot perpetrate the slightest equivocation without at the same time betraying the meanness of which they are guilty, and Frank was one of them. Ruth however received this statement in full satisfaction of all her wonderings, and having refolded Kate's note put it into her bosom, saying as she did so, "Poor Cecil!" She then laid her head upon her husband's knee, clasping it with her hands, and so continued until Frank laid his fingers on her pretty gentle face, and was surprised to find it wet with tears.

"Crying, dear Ruth," he said throwing away his cigar and holding up her face to his. "What is troubling you, my darling?" He kissed her forehead and then released her.

"I was thinking," she answered, "that before

Cecil committed the rash act which ruined him, he was noticed to be thoughtful, silent, and abstracted, and none guessed what he was contemplating, none knew until it was too late."

"It was unfortunate that I was away. Had I known——" said Frank with a sigh.

"Yes, had you known," said Ruth with animation strange to her, "or had any other dear friend known what was troubling him so greatly, he might have found counsel or sympathy, if not the help he needed. O dear Frank! do not be angry with me—do not think I want to gratify a woman's curiosity when I say that you are moody sometimes, restless, thoughtful, and I am only left to wonder what can be the cause."

A cold shudder passed though Frank, but he shook it off with an effort, and again took Ruth's head in his hands, but not, as before, turning up her face towards his.

"You silly, loving, devoted little goose," he said with a laugh, "are you frightening your-

self into the belief that I am about to commit forgery and join my poor dear friend at Dartmoor? No, dear, I am thankful to say that we are too prosperous to have that temptation, and I trust that I could resist it were it to come. I must, I see, learn to be a cleverer actor than I have been, or leave my business anxieties behind in the City."

"No! no! dear, do not act to me; do not constrain yourself to be other than you feel. I will never question you—never speak as I have done again; but what I saw to-day made me so unhappy that I resolved to tell you that I was unhappy."

Then Ruth revealed to him what she had said to Kate, and told him what she had seen—seen him turn away from his own home and have no eyes even for her, but keeping them fixed upon the ground as men do when their heads are bowed down by sorrow.

When she had finished, a little cry was heard, and the nurse came into the room to say that

Master Bernard was restless and would not go to sleep until he had seen mamma.

"Is he ill?" said Ruth, rising instantly.

"No, ma'am, I think not—only rather restless," replied the nurse.

So Ruth went away to her petted child, and when she had left the room her husband covered his face with his hands and made a long, low moaning, as though the secret in his breast was struggling to be set free.

CHAPTER III.

FRANK LOCKYER RECEIVES AN INVITATION TO VISIT MISS WYCHERLY, AND THE INTERVIEW PRODUCES A BETTER UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN THEM.

A NOTE from Mr. Wycherly, excusing himself from dinner, awaited Kate on her return to her lodging, and she appeared relieved by the communication, as she complained of indisposition. She therefore desired the servant to bring some tea and leave her undisturbed until she should ring the bell.

Some agitating thoughts had taken possession of Kate since the visit of Ruth in the morning, and though she had suppressed them during the latter part of their interview and whilst they rode together, her disquietude had returned with increased

force when Ruth had left her, and still continued to occupy her mind. What had given rise to them? It was evident that they were of a conflicting character—now producing sorrow, now exciting to anger, as declared by her flushing face and her dilating eye.

“I may be deceiving myself,” she said half aloud; “I trust I am ——” And then she folded her hands across her knees and gazed before her vacantly.

After a time the dark cloud which had passed over her face in the morning came back again, and she compressed her lips together as though to restrain some indignant utterance. A gentle sorrow would then steal over her expressive features, and words which sounded like “Poor Ruth! poor Ruth!” seemed to escape her lips.

Then her musings seemed to change, and once she rose up and spoke aloud: “Why should that confession be wrung from me by him? Why may I not carry my secret to the grave, since none has a right to ask it of me?”

She paced the room for some time before she again seated herself, and when she did so she covered her face with her handkerchief and might have been crying. Her sighs were deep and frequent, and nearly half an hour was passed in this distressing manner.

Having rung the bell she went into her own room, and when she returned nearly all traces of her recent suffering were removed. She opened a book and tried to read, but the page soon remained unturned, and she was back to her own thoughts again.

The servant knocked twice before she was told to enter, and then she announced that a man from Old Court had arrived.

“James Perks he said his name was.”

Few of his London acquaintance would have recognised Jim now. His face was swarthy and largely covered with hair; he wore a sort of keeper's coat, and had long leather gaiters on his legs. Jim had lost all trace of London polishing and had grown rather rusty, although there was

no appearance of poverty or bad fellowship, and he had been sent by the Old Court bailiff in charge of a horse which had been sold to a friend of Mr. Wycherly.

"How could you be spared from your work, James?" asked Kate, considerately, when he presented himself to her.

"We have only one fire going, miss, in the Home Copse," replied Jim, "and the new hut in Pemberton Wood is hardly dry enough to sleep in, so I asked the bailiff to send me up with the horse, and I was glad of a bit of a change."

"What? tired of charcoal-burning?" asked Kate.

"O no, miss; not in the least, miss. I am only too thankful to you and master for the work; but a day's change is good for all on us, they says," replied Jim with a bow.

"And your wife and child, James—how are they?" asked Kate.

"Happy and well, miss, I'm proud to say,"

replied Jim, fumbling in one of his many pockets, and then adding : “ If I might make so bold, I have brought a letter which I got yesterday from the postman.”

Kate just glanced at the proffered letter, which she received, and then kept it in her hand without looking at it again.

Jim appeared not to notice the action, and went on to say :—

“ Baby has growed so, miss, you’d scarce a’ knowned it if you’d met it promiscuous. I hardly do myself—not seeing it only once a week when I goes home o’ Saturdays. I shouldn’t be able to do that, only my mate’s a steady good fellow, and I can leave him to look arter the fires.”

Kate moved her head and smiled, as though Jim’s report interested her, but it is a question whether she heard or comprehended what he was saying.

“ When do you return home ? ” she asked, when Jim had finished speaking, and paused some time for a reply.

"To-morrow, miss, if master pleases."

"To-morrow. Go to the servant, James, and have what refreshment you require. I will see you again." Kate rose as she was speaking and went into her own room, carrying with her Jim's letter, still unopened, in her hand.

Jim employed himself very industriously for half an hour, and had waited some time longer before he was summoned to Miss Wycherly. She gave him back his letter, saying only, "Thank you, James."

Jim having stowed his letter away safely in his pocket, was about to leave the room when Miss Wycherly said :—

"One moment, James. You will not leave London until the mid-day train to-morrow, and you will please come here at eleven. Before you do so, you must do something for me"— adding with a smile, "with your usual skill and fidelity. You know Mr. Lockyer's place of business."

"Yes, miss," replied Jim, "of course—very well, of course."

"Then you will take this note to him, and I should wish you to deliver it into his own hands. It is important that he should have it, and I know I may trust you to deliver it."

Kate took a sovereign from her purse, and Jim said "No, no, thank you, miss;" but as Miss Wycherly continued to hold it towards him, he made a bow and received the money. He was Kate's devoted slave none the less for that.

The next morning Jim delivered the note to Mr. Lockyer, who coloured very much as he read it. It was very brief :—

"Come to me, if you please, at one o'clock to-day, Thursday."

"C. W."

What was the meaning of this request? Had it reference to Ruth's visit? Had Ruth made any revelation to her friend which she had con-

cealed from him? No—that could not be, after what had passed between him and his wife. He was perplexed.

Mr. Wycherly was too full of business that morning to notice the slight pallor of Kate's cheek, and so he bade her good-bye without any questioning, and went away to his Board-meeting.

If Frank was impatient for the time of his appointment with Kate to arrive, she was equally so, and looked more than once at the clock as though she would have hastened the measured progress of the hands.

Mr. Lockyer was announced at last, and when he entered the room he found Kate alone, and prepared to receive him.

"My note, I presume, must have surprised you, Mr. Lockyer," said Kate. "Pray be seated."

"I confess to some surprise," replied Frank, "and am anxiously awaiting the explanation. I hope I am to do you some service."

Kate did not notice the latter remark, but said calmly :—

“ Ruth, as you know, paid me a short visit yesterday, and afterwards took me to call upon her mother.”

“ Yes, she told me so, and ”—he paused—“ and she also showed me the note she had received in the morning.”

“ I concluded she would have done so. May I ask what explanation you gave her of that part which had reference to yourself ? ”

“ Explanation ? Of myself ? ” asked Frank with slight confusion of manner.

“ Yes ; did you explain to her why you had not delivered my messages to her ? ” said Kate with some emphasis.

“ Yes. I did explain,” answered Frank, redenying, “ and the explanation was perfectly satisfactory to her.”

“ May I ask what you said to her ? ” continued Kate. “ This may appear a bold question, and I do not ask it without a strong motive

to know the truth, and after most grave deliberation."

Frank remained silent.

"You say that she was satisfied. Did you—I must ask you—did you tell her the truth, Frank Lockyer?" said Kate firmly.

Frank felt the question to be an adjuration, and he replied like one compelled to answer:—

"No, I did not tell her any of the truth, and I would not—dare not."

"Why, sir?" said Kate sternly.

"You have asked me for the secret of my life, Kate Wycherly, and I will tell it you, for I can keep it from you no longer. I have married without loving. I speak the truth. I was told that I had deceived Ruth into the belief that I loved her—that by acts and words to which I attached no serious meaning I had won her affections, and that if I undid her I should be a scoundrel. I was left to choose between her claims upon me and my own peace. I was told there was no choice—that God and man

required, if the happiness of two lives were at stake, mine should be the sacrifice. I hesitated. It was a dreadful thing to ask of me. It seemed so then, when I had loved no other. What is it now, when I do love—when I have found the one to whom I could have given the devotion of my life if it had been mine to give! I made the sacrifice and married Ruth, but not until you had demanded that I should do so."

"Until I had demanded it?" asked Kate scarcely above her breath.

"Yes, you, Kate. You sent that demand by your father, and I am free to own that the dread of your censure—the loss of your good opinion—decided the course I took, perhaps as much as my own sense of honour. I married—I have striven to continue Ruth in her belief that I loved her—have watched for every opportunity to add some pleasure to her life; I have striven to remember every hour of the day her gentleness, goodness, and devotion, that I might, if it were possible,

bring myself to love her; and though I would suffer any pain rather than she should suspect the truth, I cannot feel that she is loved by me."

"Why have I provoked this confession from you? I had no right to do so," said Kate more tenderly.

"I wish you to know the truth," replied Frank. "I wish you to know how I have met my fate—how I have striven to repay Ruth her love with love—how I have failed, and why."

"Ah, why?" said Kate.

"Because there has come between us a phantom which I alone have seen—whose influence I have alone felt—which is to me as a dead love which was about me, and which departed from me before I knew I had a heart that could be touched so deeply. Can you not guess who has come between us?—who has made me weak to subdue myself? Have you not seen where my love has gone?"

Kate rose up as he spoke. The dark cloud came into her face, and her eyes glittered with anger, as she replied. "Silence! silence, sir!

My father's friend! my friend's husband! to say this to me!"

"Acquit me at once of such wickedness as you imagine my words convey. I have never had one thought that was unworthy of you or of myself, and that truth is known to the angels. Why I have spoken now I can hardly tell. Perhaps I have been mad!"

He hid his face and so continued to do for some minutes. At length he said :—

"Miss Wycherly, what I have spoken must have shocked you greatly. Again I say, I know not why I offended you with such words as I have uttered. You cannot forget them—your noble truthful nature will not let you. All I dare ask of you is to forgive me—do not despise me as I deserve to be despised."

Kate could not reply to him for some moments. When she was capable of speaking she said :—

"Mr. Lockyer, you have indeed confided to me a terrible revelation. For Ruth's sake—for your own sake—never make such another confidence.

You ask me to forgive you what has caused me almost the greatest pain I have ever known. Yes, I do forgive you ; and if my sympathy is of any comfort to you, you have that also, and I will prove it to you. You, Mr. Lockyer, are master of your own fate if you will ask for strength where it can surely be found. You have followed, as you say truly, a phantom which has betrayed you to the loss of your own peace. Let me dispel the illusion."

"Would that it were possible to do so!" exclaimed Frank.

"I do not despair of success," said Kate calmly. "You have encouraged yourself to believe, Mr. Lockyer, that your marriage with Ruth has deprived you of a possible union with another whom you think you could have loved. Is it not so?"

"Yes."

"It would be affectation unworthy this solemn conference did I not own that I understand you, and that I am the one to whom your words referred."

"Yes."

"Let me undeceive you. I was very young when first we met, but thanks to the careful teaching of the two estimable women who took upon themselves my poor mother's duties when she died, I had learned to value the vain and trifling at their true worth, and you I thought were both."

"You had some right to think so, perhaps," said Frank in a low voice.

"I cannot think that my good opinion was then of interest to you, or you would have seen that you were no favourite of mine, and it was not until I believed you had attached yourself to Ruth that I allowed you to assume the common familiarities of a friend. Was it not so?"

"Yes," replied Frank, "I often thought that you were repellent, and that I was less agreeable to you than many others."

"You thought rightly. I saw that you looked upon women as pretty toys to wile away an idle hour—unconscious, perhaps, of the extreme sus-

ceptibility of woman's nature, or utterly regardless of it if you were so. I was vexed that Ruth saw you with other eyes and that she loved you. I did not suspect that she could have done so until it was too late to warn her of the danger of giving her affection to such a selfish trifler. I am speaking very plainly. Shall I go on?"

Frank bowed.

"I never suspected what you have told me to-day—that you did not love my friend. Had I known it, your sacrifice should not have been made, for better had it been for Ruth that she should have found she had been deceived before you made her your wife than live, as she has done, happy in her blind belief for a few brief years, to know at last, when you have tired of your hypocrisy, that she was never loved."

"She shall never know it from any act or word of mine," said Frank.

"You think so. She might have made the discovery this morning, Mr. Lockyer. Had she

been less pure and loving she might have had such doubts begotten, that even your sophistry could not have removed. I listened to her with a beating heart. As yet her true love has saved her from a great sorrow; and believing this,—recalling much that has passed between you and me, Mr. Lockyer, and to which I had attached only an honest meaning,—I grew alarmed for Ruth and for myself”

“Do not be unjust ?” said Frank, in a low voice.

“I will not. I have believed your disavowal that you contemplated any evil, or we should not be here together. I have had a sharp conflict with myself—with womanly reserve and my desire to save Ruth—to save you. I should have spared myself this interview, I fear, but for one—one recollection—your steadfast, courageous adherence to your fallen friend.” Kate’s voice faltered for the first time, and her eyelids drooped and shut out the light.

“To Cecil Hartley ?” said Frank.

"To Cecil Hartley," Kate repeated. "The man I loved—the man I still love in shame and sorrow, who has full possession of my heart, and shall retain it until I die. You now have secret for secret, Mr. Lockyer, knowing that I may trust to your honourable keeping what I have never willingly discovered even to—Cecil."

Kate covered her burning face and remained silent for some moments, and until Frank spoke.

"What can I say to you? What assurance can I give?"

"This, Mr. Lockyer," said Kate, interrupting him,—"that you will think over what has passed to-day—that you will be satisfied that you could never have been anything to me, hardly the friend you have been, but for Ruth and—Cecil; that my love for the poor exile is strong and enduring; that I should hate him who would seek to step between us, as you would have done. Do you understand me?"

"I think I do," replied Frank sadly.

"Be sure you do for your own peace—for Ruth's peace," said Kate. "One word more. We must not meet, as we have done, Mr. Lockyer. I leave to you the way of doing this without exciting remark from my father. I shall resume my old relations with Ruth, and which I have neglected—having had my own sorrow. Who has not? We part friends, Mr. Lockyer; better friends, for my part, than at any time since I have known you; but we must not meet again—without Ruth. Take my hand, Mr. Lockyer."

Frank did as she requested.

"You have a privilege which I have not," she said; "you can write to Cecil. You have neglected him of late, have you not? Perhaps the cause for your silence is now removed. You will write to him shortly, and you will keep my secret as I will keep yours—so long as we both live, and so long as any can be influenced by what we have said to each other."

Frank promised in a few earnest words to do all she had required of him, and then he took his

leave of her and went his way, his mind disquieted and struggling to discern a light to guide him through the darkness which surrounded him.

CHAPTER IV.

SORROW, THE GREAT TEACHER, COMES TO FRANK
LOCKYER, WHO PROVES A REBELLIOUS
LEARNER.

WHEN Frank returned to the City he found that attention to business was impossible. He did not care to dine *tête-à-tête* with Ruth, feeling that he had done her a secret wrong, and for which he was scarcely repentant as yet. Therefore he decided to take a country ramble and think over the events of the morning.

The retrospect was not very agreeable. Miss Wycherly had used bitter words—true words perhaps, and fairly provoked. “Vain and selfish trifler.” Had he deserved to be so considered at any time? Well! He could hardly say “not

proven." He never could have been anything to Kate Wycherly, "hardly the friend he had been, but for Ruth and Cecil." A hard truth to tell the one-time lady-killer, and almost in the same breath with which she had declared how strong and enduring was her love for the convicted Cecil.

Poor Cecil! it would have increased his punishment a hundred-fold had he known that he had lost so much. Yet, not lost, for had she not declared that she loved him still, despite the shame which had fallen upon his name and the exile which separated them? Would he ever know that he was loved so truly? And knowing it, would it bring a new joy or enlarge the old sorrow? Frank thought he could answer his own questions so long as Mr. Wycherly lived.

Another question puzzled him more, and at last he gave up the solution. How did Kate know he had not written of late to Cecil, seeing that she was denied the privilege of writing to

him? She had truly surmised the reason for his silence. Cecil had confessed to him his admiration of Kate Wycherly, and the accusing conscience told him he was a traitor to his unhappy friend. He would write to Cecil by-and-by.

“And so, after all,” he said aloud, and with the same excited manner he had used when talking with Cecil years before, “Ruth—my Ruth, gentle and trusting—is the only one who has thought me worth loving. What an ungrateful fellow I have been, and am, not to love her as she deserves to be!”

It was late when he returned home, as he could not dispossess himself of the feeling that he had wronged Ruth and greatly imperilled her future happiness, for had she loved him less she might have suspected the true cause of the anxiety which she had observed and striven to remove, like a true wife. As it was, happily for her, happily for him, she loved so purely that the thought of any unfaithfulness was impossible

to her, and therefore no doubt of his truth was created by the strange discovery she had made on the receipt of Kate's letter. As he approached his house there were lights moving about within, and he foreboded some evil.

Little Bernard had been very restless all day. The doctor had been sent for, and his hopeful assurances had quieted Ruth's fears, and she in her turn comforted her husband. He had need of comfort from her, as his own heart reproached him for many things done and undone, and which would come back to him as he sat thinking of his sick boy.

When Frank awoke on the morning following the eventful day we have noted in the preceding chapter, he found that Ruth had already risen and was absent from the room. She had only retired to rest the night before in order that her husband might be induced to do the same; but as soon as he slept she had arisen and gone to her sick child. Throughout the night she had sat beside the boy's bed, at times

holding his feverish hand in her own, then touching his flushed cheek or moistening his parched lips, wondering all the time when the fever would pass away and leave him to rest peacefully. The night seemed very long, not that she grew weary of her watch, but she hoped—she knew not why—that with the new day the change she desired to see so much would come. Once or twice she stole noiselessly down to her own room to learn if her husband slept, and having satisfied herself that he did so, she returned again to keep her anxious vigil beside her darling.

The early hours of the morning, cold and grey, came in their allotted time; but though she could feel the change, hand and cheek and lip of the restless boy retained their feverish heat. The hectic flush upon his face gave it an unusual beauty, and alarmed the loving watcher, who, excited by the want of sleep, fancied the angel-look had come and that he would be her own no longer.

When she heard Frank open his chamber-door

she rose hastily and hurried to meet him on the stair, smiling to hide her own fears from him who loved Bernard so very, very dearly.

"He is better I am sure, this morning, dear," she said: "nurse thinks so too. He sleeps, although he is restless at times, and will be so until the fever has run its course. Will you come and see him?" And the two stood beside the little couch conversing in whispers, she mastering her own anxieties and speaking hopefully, whilst he believed her words, made credulous by his love for the child.

With a gentle cheerfulness she discharged her morning duties, striving still to hide from Frank any appearance of anxiety, and bade him good-by with a cheery voice when he left her for his office in the City. But when the door closed upon him the pleasant look faded from her face, and hastening back to the boy, she was conscious neither of fatigue nor want of sleep, her impatience for the doctor's coming growing intense as the morning advanced.

Bernard looked at her with his heavy eyes and then stretched out his hands to be taken in her arms. When there, he could not rest, but moved his burning head from side to side, murmuring every now and then, "Drink, mamma, drink!"

Ruth, as she moistened his parched lips, glanced at the clock upon the mantel-piece, and wondered why time moved on so slowly.

At last the welcome advent of the doctor! Gently as he ascended the stairs Ruth thought she could hear his footsteps, which were to bring restored health to her child. For a while the doctor counted the sufferer's pulse, looking earnestly upon his face. Ruth's heart almost stopped when a slight motion of the doctor's head—unintentional perhaps—told her that he had arrived at some unfavourable conclusion. A terrified sorrow came into the gentle face of Ruth, and her distended eyes seemed to demand the truth, as the quick heaving of her bosom choked the words she would have uttered. It

was not until he had asked for pen and paper that she could inquire if the child were worse.

"I am not justified in saying that he is better," replied the doctor with a grave smile, "and I had hoped to have found some of the bad symptoms allayed ; but children are good patients, the more especially when they have good nurses." Having written his prescription he continued : " You will have this prepared as soon as possible, and I hope that its effects will be advantageous to our little patient. I will see him again by-and-by."

"When, sir ?" asked Ruth almost in a whisper.
"In an hour or two ?"

"We must not expect a change so soon as that, my dear madam," replied the doctor. "Say in the evening——"

"Or earlier, if possible," interrupted Ruth. "In the afternoon before his father returns,—at four—five o'clock ?"

"Yes, I will call as I finish my round. I will be here at five. Good-morning."

And then he left the room as Bernard cried again, in a peevish voice, "Drink, mamma, drink!"

While Ruth ministered to her boy she heard the doctor's carriage drive away, and felt—as many have felt before and since—that there would be hope and comfort if she could have called him back and kept him by her darling's bed.

Ten, eleven, twelve minutes had passed since the footboy had been sent with the new prescription, and the time appeared almost an hour. The hands of Ruth's watch marked more minutes, and the boy had not returned. Ruth could have traversed the distance he had gone in less than half the time, she was certain—perhaps so, as love would have given wings to her feet. More minutes passed, and then Ruth went down to the dining-room, and out into the balcony, looking down the street as though by that act she hoped to hasten the bearer of the precious draught which was to bring healing to her

suffering child. Foot passengers and two or three carriages were passing up and down, but she did not see them : she had only eyes for her tardy messenger. She saw him turn the corner of the street at last, and almost called him by name. The footboy met a friend and, regardless of the importance of his mission, stopped to indulge in a little mirthful chat. Ruth's anger rose against him, and she called him "cruel boy, ungrateful, wicked ;" but her words were borne away into the air. She waved her handkerchief, she stamped her foot in the excitement of suspense, and then rang the bell violently, retiring from the balcony with an angry frown upon her face to see the footboy part from his friend with a laugh loud enough to reach her ears. "Cruel, unfeeling boy !" she said again, and from that moment the lad lost favour in the eyes of his gentle mistress.

The medicine produced an uneasy slumber, but it seemed like sleep, and Ruth was relieved, knowing how much her child's recovery depended

upon that soothing influence. Bernard had gone into this state of comparative repose clasping one of his mother's fingers, and though her temples throbbed painfully, and the constrained position in which she sat was productive of pain also, Ruth sought to obtain no relief for herself, fearing to wake the sleeper. Time was of no account to her then, as she found comfort in her hopes that her boy would be restored to her in health soon—yes—very soon.

At length Bernard woke, and the old cry came from his lips :—

“ Drink, mamma, drink !”

She gave him drink, and then kissed his cheek, and fancied the fire in his blood was not so fierce, nor was the eye so heavy as when it had wanted sleep. Then she bathed her own temples and stretched her cramped limbs, and knelt down by her darling's bed and prayed for him.

When the doctor came at the appointed time he pronounced the boy improved; and bade the

mother be of better hopes. Then, having given some further directions, he went away, promising to call early in the morning.

Bernard was sleeping again when Frank returned from the City an hour earlier than usual, and Ruth received him almost on the door-step.

"Bernard is so much better, so much improved since the morning," she said. "The doctor was here not an hour ago, and the darling is now asleep."

"Has the doctor been twice to-day?" asked Frank, earnestly.

"Yes, dear, at my request—only at my request. You may come with me, and see the boy, if you promise to be very quiet;" and then circling Frank with her arm, she conducted him up-stairs.

When they had stood for some minutes by the boy's bed-side, Frank would have kissed him; but Ruth interposed, and having motioned her husband to avoid disturbing the sleeper, led the way to the drawing-room.

"He only wants rest. I am sure of that," said

Ruth, "and he has slept well this afternoon, so you must not be over-anxious about him."

"No, I will not; but as I was not so busy in the City, I hastened home," replied Frank. "You look very pale, Ruth," he added; "have you been out to-day?"

"No, not to-day, dear," and she might have told him that she had had no sleep, except now and then a fitful doze, since Bernard sickened.

"Come, put on your bonnet," said Frank, "and we will have half-an-hour's walk before dinner.

Ruth paused a moment, as though her heart held back the "Yes" with which she answered him.

Ruth was soon ready, and they walked to an adjoining enclosure where many happy children were at play, some of whom were Bernard's companions. One or two who knew Ruth came to her, inquiring for their playmate, and she answered them that he was "*not quite* well, but that he would soon be with them again," her eyes filling with tears, she knew not wherefore.

And Ruth and Frank walked together, talking of other things than their sick child, but often relapsing into silence. During those frequent pauses, if they could have looked into each other's breasts, what would they have seen?

In Ruth's a holy love hovering round the bed of her sick child, then clinging about her husband to keep away the recurrent fears which would come to herself despite the bravery with which she drove them back. In Frank's breast would have been seen a fierce conflict between passion and duty, wounded vanity fighting on the weaker side and helping, perhaps, to win the victory.

If the good surrounding us is at times disregarded, the evil which is about us—evil which would destroy our peace—is also hidden from us by the hand of mercy.

It is true, if strange, that at an after-hour Frank remembered—to the disadvantage of his wife—that at their meal that day she had seemed more cheerful than himself.

"I will now go to Bernard," said Ruth, "as nurse is tired, I have no doubt, and will need rest. I have had a couch taken into the nursery, and so can sleep comfortably. You can go to bed when you like, dear, as I shan't allow you to see Bernard again to-night."

"Eh ? Why not ?" asked Frank.

"Why ?" replied Ruth, kissing him. "We may be all asleep, and you will disturb us. Good night, dear."

She kissed him again, and had her mind been less disturbed she might have noticed that her salute was not returned.

The nurse, though very fond of her little charge, willingly resigned him to the care of her mistress, forgetful, doubtless, how many hours the mother had watched sleeplessly beside her child ! Ruth had forgotten also—quite forgotten all her weariness when the boy's fits of restlessness returned, and he asked to be taken again on his mother's lap. After a time the uneasy slumber was resumed ; then broken and re-

sumed again, until the morning came; first, cold and grey, then warm and bright, as though it shone upon no anxious watchers—no suffering children.

Breakfast was ended and Frank ready to depart for the City before he was permitted to see Bernard. The little fellow tried to smile when his father spoke to him, promising to bring him a book or toy “for being such a good little man;” and with that pleasant recognition, Frank appeared to be content. His look belied him, for he went downstairs with a heavy heart, full of parental fears, which he strove successfully for a while to keep from Ruth.

“When is the doctor coming again?” he asked, rather coldly. “In the afternoon?”

“Oh no, before then!” replied Ruth. “He will be here about eleven, I hope.”

“Well, you will hear what he says, and if he—that is, I should like to see him in the afternoon—if he thinks the boy is no better, send a note on to me. Don’t look so frightened, you little

goose," Frank said, kissing her. "If I had any grave apprehension I should not leave you this morning."

And then Ruth smiled, and Frank, having pressed her hand gently, went to the City.

Before Ruth returned to her child she wrote brief notes to her mother and to Kate Wycherly, detailing the particulars of this her greatest sorrow since she had been married, and had hardly finished when she was surprised at the arrival of the doctor a full hour before his usual time of visiting.

He gave no explanation, but appeared to be gratified at Ruth's account of his patient, to whom he hastened, and after some conversation said :—

"Better, certainly better than he was yesterday ; the danger has undoubtedly lessened."

"*Danger?* Is there danger ?" asked Ruth, pressing her hands upon her bosom.

"There is always some danger in sickness, my dear madam," replied the doctor, smiling gravely

as before, "but I think it has diminished in our case since the morning, and if sleep can be obtained for a continuance, to-morrow will remove much of our anxiety."

Ruth was alarmed, greatly alarmed, and told the doctor what Frank had desired her to say.

"Very well," answered the doctor. "Yes—very well. You may tell Mr. Lockyer that I will be here again at five;" and when he bade Ruth good morning she could only curtsey in response.

Danger! Ruth had not imagined that condition to be imminent. She had thought only of Bernard's present suffering, his harassing thirst, his burning head, his wearying restlessness. She had only thought of the time which would elapse before her boy would be restored to his healthful looks, activity of limbs, and his pleasant prattle. Danger? Danger of what?

The word which came in answer almost stunned her by its terrible significance—"Death!"

She sprang up from her chair and hastened to

her boy's bed, as though she feared that the dreaded angel might have passed through the room and borne away the life to her so precious.

No—the boy was only sleeping.

As soon as she could collect herself she wrote and despatched a few hurried lines to her husband, and then returned to her watch.

The boy soon awoke, as the former restlessness had returned and continued until the doctor came at five o'clock. He said little to Ruth, but to Frank he freely imparted his apprehension of increased danger to his patient.

The unexpected intelligence nearly overpowered the doting father, and it was some time before he could rejoin Ruth. When he did so she saw at once that part of the truth had been concealed from her ; but with a strong effort she controlled any exhibition of her own distress, and sought by hopeful words to comfort her sorrowing husband. Her loving consideration was misunderstood by him for whom this great effort was made, and Frank condemned her in his own mind, wondering

at her apathy and want of motherly instinct of her child's peril.

She apathetic ! She who had watched through two long sleepless nights and days, concealing her fears and weariness that he, her beloved husband, might take his rest and go about his daily work peacefully ! The time was coming when he would judge her more gently perhaps, and when sorrow for past injustice would have chastened his heart and shown him the value of a love he had estimated too lightly.

Other days and nights passed, and the shadow of death came into the house, presaging the coming of the dread Presence.

Frank had laid himself upon the bed beside his boy, now worn and quiet, and folding him in his arms, watched the quick heaving of his bosom, knowing that every breath was, as it were, a sound of approaching death. Utterly out-wearied, Ruth was sleeping near them, and Frank would have had her awakened, but he feared that if he spoke the boy might learn that he was dying, and be

frightened at his words. So he kept silent until there came a long low sigh, and the child was with the angels.

No sound—no motion! and the father accepted the hard belief that his little son was dead. He rose from the bed and went to Ruth. He awakened her by laying his hand gently upon her shoulder. She started at his touch, and he answered her inquiring look saying, “He is gone, dear Ruth.”

For many hours she had had no hope that her child could live, but now that he had gone from her the grief pent up in her heart burst forth in a passion of tears, as she fell upon her knees beside the bed—the bier of her dead boy.

* * * * *

The windows of Frank Lockyer’s house were no longer darkened, and the warm and cheerful sun shone into the rooms where a happy child had been seen once on a time at play. He would be seen there no more, not even lying in his grave-clothes.

Frank sorrowed greatly, at first in silence ; but after a time he spoke of the grief which had overtaken him as though he wondered why he had been so stricken and other men spared. He thought thus more and more every day, although he seldom gave utterance to his discontent. Other men no better than he had a divided love, and could find consolation in that which remained to them when Death had taken a part ; but Bernard—his brave, darling Bernard—was the only depository of that love which had been so cruelly coerced into bondage. Had his boy been left to him he would have had a constant incentive to the performance of the vows which he had made, and which had required so much self-sacrifice to fulfil without creating the suspicion of an enforced obedience.

Ruth marked how much her husband grieved for the loss they had sustained, but happily did not suspect one great cause of his sorrow. Her duty she knew was to pour balm into his wound, and therefore she never spoke of Bernard

except when Frank made it the subject of their conversation. Again she was misunderstood, and Frank said to her one evening when she had tried in vain to provoke him into cheerfulness :—

“I wish I had your temperament, Ruth—I wish I could put aside my sorrows as well as you do, and think less of our dear boy.”

Had Frank seen how Ruth’s eyes filled with tears at this reproach, how her full bosom heaved and would not be kept down by the hands pressed upon it, he would have condemned his own injustice, and discovered perhaps how much Ruth’s wifely love endured for him. But it was evening, almost night, when Frank spoke those cruel words, and he saw not his wife.

“Do you—can you think that I forget him,” Ruth said after a time, “that there is one hour of the day he is not about me? Wherever I moved through this house he was my companion. Whatever thing I touch or see around me has

some connection with my lost darling——” She was obliged to pause.

“Yes, yes—it must be so,” said Frank; “I ought not to have thought otherwise. Come, kiss me and forgive me. And yet, Ruth,” he continued, as she stood with her arm around his neck, “and yet you bear your loss so much more bravely than I do.”

“Because I am afraid——” she paused and then added, “I am right to tell you this—I am afraid you repine that He who gave hath taken away, and that you are not resigned to have your child called back to Heaven.”

“True, I am rebellious—I cannot kiss the rod as meekly as you do. Why was he taken from us—our only one?”

“Who can answer?” replied Ruth, “Not I; but I believe there is no act of God that is not an act of mercy. Who can say what sorrow and what sin lies about our path, or who shall escape either whose road is long between the cradle and the grave?”

Strong in her faith, Ruth mourned her child as a treasure to be restored to her. Strong in her love, she strove to comfort her husband ; and her words, which at first were simply words, became at last to sound in his heart like harmonious music—echoes of the holy song his happy child was singing.

CHAPTER V.

MUCKLEBRIDGE RACES INTRODUCE US TO A NEW AND AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

THE rain fell in torrents, ceasing however at intervals of an hour or so, and quite destroying the anticipated pleasure of Mucklebridge Races. They were only country races it is true, but having a Farmers' Purse, a Hunters' Cup, a Welter Race, and Consolation Stakes on the card of the day's sport, they excited considerable interest in the little world lying around Mucklebridge. Coming late in the season, very fine weather was not expected, but such a rain as was falling "hadn't been known for twenty years 'afore," according to the best authority.

The gipsies were huddled under their carts drawn up by the hedge-side, and their sticks,

"three a penny," were lying like unemployed machinery, provoking grumbling and ill temper, which unlimited tobacco-smoking failed to allay altogether. The gingerbread stalls were only skeletons, as the day was so unpromising that to have covered the framework with canvas would have been worse than labour in vain; and their owners leaned sulkily at the door-ways of their "living caravans," not having spirits even to chaff one another. The poor brutes which drew these detached residences from place to place were picking up their daily grass, their long uncurried coats streaming with the down-pour and becoming matted into elf-locks, which did not improve the effect of their condition, the internal structure of horse and ass being sufficiently demonstrative almost for an anatomical lecture. Some of the itinerant vendors of nuts and cakes became desperate enough to walk about the sloppy field or race-course, bawling their wares, but the water pouring out through the bottom of their baskets was not favourable to the crispness

of their gingerbread, however cleansing it might be to the Barcelonas. "The only booth in the fair," where the actors could be seen, closed itself up in despair, and the whole of the talented company, kings and queens, lords and clowns, might have been seen through a hole in the canvas gathered round a cresset filled with burning coke ; some of the men smoking in silence, others playing at dominoes, whilst the women were busied in the ordinary and unromantic occupation of darning stockings and other articles of attire. Three or four professors of "the noble art of self-defence" had been keeping out the wet by a free use of stimulants, and were expending some of their cultivated blackguardism upon each other. "The grand stand" was waterproof, being covered with rick-cloths and carpeted with straw, and at the front of this erection the stewards gallantly presented themselves every now and then, as though to encourage the dripping outsiders, and assure them that the sport was not to be abandoned. "The Derby" and "The Newmarket"

were not so commodiously arranged, being composed of broad-wheeled waggons covered with boughs, which were not impervious to the rain, although cool and ornamental in appearance.

One canvas booth however promised shelter from the wet, as it was made of white tarpauling, over which the rain streamed to the ground without penetrating to the interior of the tent. Lord George Bentinck had not then taken his revenge on the blacklegs by excluding them from the racecourses, and "The Coventry" was a travelling branch of "The Benevolent," under the direction of an experienced *croupier* connected with the disreputable establishment of Messrs. Skinner & Co. The *roulette* ball was rolling busily, and many of the young farmers who had sought shelter from the rain at the invitation of the attendant Cerberus (his one head being a match for any ordinary three) had tried their luck, and generally found that though they might have had the luck to win One on the black, Four on the red, and Seven on the yellow, they were

generally on the wrong colour when the ball ceased rolling, especially if the accumulation of stakes was against the presiding cheat. A break in the weather occurred, fortunately about the time the Farmers' and Hunters' Stakes were to be contested, and the sound of the steward's bell emptied "The Coventry" for a time.

"Better than I thought for," said the managing leg to his companions. "I fancied the day would have been against us, but it's proved quite t'other. A little brandy will be acceptable, I fancy, gentlemen?"

The men drank pretty freely of the spirit as they counted their gains.

"I wonder where Kiddy has got. He promised to meet us here," said the manager; "and we might have done more had we had another bonnet or two."

"And Kiddy's a good 'un," replied a minor demon—"especially with yokels. I wonder what's got him."

"His 'old and only weakness,' as he says.

Drunk and incapable somewhere or the other, I suppose," said the manager. " He's been quodded a week for that bout at Worthing, and I'll be bound he made a wet night of it when he left the county jug. Here's his jolly good health, and better luck next time."

Kiddy, whoever he was, would have been gratified to have witnessed the high estimation in which he was held by the fraternity of sharpers assembled in "The Coventry," and would no doubt have pledged them as deeply in return.

"Now put away the spirituous, for the rain's coming down like mad again," said the chief player. "Tout away, Lobsky, whilst I set the ball a-rolling ; and, gentlemen, make your game ! —make your game ! ONE on black, FOUR on red, SEVEN on yellow, and no bars or *aprez* ! Yallow has won." And the bonnets or confederates proceeded to play with as much regularity as they could have done had they actually been engaged at the game profiting or losing by the chances of the table.

We have seen enough of Mucklebridge Races, and so had a wayfarer passing along the high road adjoining the race-field. He had paused a few minutes, resting the small bundle he carried on the top of a rail closing a gap in the hedge ; and having seen the Welter Race contested and won by a gallant old thorough-bred chestnut taken from the cart of a Cheap Jack, and ridden by a lad in the most unjockeyfied costume, resumed his journey. He cared nothing for the rain as he walked onward through Mucklebridge town and away towards the outlying country, nor did he halt, although invited to drink by a half-tipsy yeoman who had pulled up at the Red Lion in the morning, and had preferred the warm parlour of the inn to a wet drive to Mucklebridge Races.

Five miles further on the road he stopped and referred to a rude tracery upon a piece of paper which he had carried in his hat, and having satisfied himself of his whereabouts, he walked on some distance, and then struck off down a parish-

road, until he came to a small neat public-house bearing the sign of the "Six Horseshoes," and which he entered, proceeding at once to the little bar enshrining the hostess, who, spectacles on nose, was busy darning her liege lord's thick-ribbed worsted stockings.

"Good-day, ma'am," said the wayfarer. "I believe you have a letter for me—Charles Harrison?"

"Yes, to be sure I has," said the landlady, laying aside her work; "been here these two days, and nather my master or me could make out who it was for. We knowed nobody of your name; but there it is safe as the postman left it."

The wayfarer received the letter, and just glancing at the superscription, continued:—

"Can I have a bed here for a night or two?"

"Yes, to be sure you can," was the reply; "we keeps two beds for travellers—one at sixpence a night, and the t'other at ninepence."

"I should like the better room," said the wayfarer; "and if I could have a fire in it I should

be glad, as I have walked nearly all day through this pitiless rain."

"Well, it has rained certainly," said the hostess, "and this Mucklebridge Races too. You wants a fire, do you ? well, we don't often make 'un in the bed-room, but you shall be 'comodated,—you're wet through I take it ?"

"Yes, wet to the skin," said the wayfarer, "and I am afraid the change of linen I have in my bundle is little better."

"Let's see, child," said the hostess, unfastening the bundle. "Well, not so bad as one might have thought for; I'll take 'em into the kitchen and dry 'em a bit for you. You'll find a fire in our parlour to-day, as its Mucklebridge Races, and can sit there and dry yoursen a bit till your room's ready."

The wayfarer accepted the proposal, and having asked for some warmed ale, sat down before the fire still holding the unopened letter in his hand.

The rain had ceased during the last half-hour of his journey, and the wind had partially dried his outer garments, but the warm liquor was very

grateful, chilled as he had been by the wet. He placed the letter still unopened on the mantelpiece before him, and sat, with his feet upon the fender, gazing into the fire, and was only roused from his reverie by his hostess announcing that his room was ready, "tho' the chimbley smoked a little, not being used to have any kindling in it."

The wayfarer having ordered some tea and a rasher to be prepared for him in half an hour, took the letter and went to his room, in which he found a clean bed and scant furniture; and having changed his under garments returned to the parlour. When seated at his promising meal—the hostess had added some eggs to the rasher—another guest arrived even more drenched than Harrison had been, as the rain had returned with increased violence. The new-comer carried in his hand a carpet-bag, and was not slow in demanding the accommodation necessary to avail himself of its contents.

"Don't crawl about in that way, old woman," he said, "I'm wet through and cold to my marrow.

Where can I change ?—and bring me a large glass of brandy and water."

The hostess of the "Six Horseshoes" moved none the quicker for her guest's impatience ; but as she "lived to please" she made no rejoinder, but attended to the wants of her customer in comparative silence.

The letter addressed to Charles Harrison had been opened and read in the bed-room up stairs, and was again perused during the absence of the last comer, who had gone upstairs, no doubt to the sixpenny apartment.

It is necessary that we should know how the first wayfarer had passed the last five years of his life. There had been little change in the daily routine of those long weary years. He had lodged in hulks, and worked in dock-yards hewing stones and dragging heavy loads in companionship with desperate men—burglars, highwaymen, and almost murderers. He had passed his hours of rest in lonely cells, lonely without privacy, knowing always that watchful eyes looked

in upon him. His rest had been broken by the sharp click of his prison-lock, or the loud grating of the warder's key. He had risen, moved, stopped, laid down, eaten, and drunk at the word of command like a tutored dog, and worn the livery of crime, badged and numbered, and was thankful that the eyes of those he loved could not look upon him—even if they had cared to do so. Sickness of body begotten by sickness of heart came and was welcomed, as it removed him from his degrading toil and brought him a little closer to the state from which he had been taken. His quiet endurance won him a friend in the kindly man who ministered to the sick, and his lameness—the consequence of his old accident—was made to plead for a mitigation of his toil, so that his tasks were easier and less degrading.

At one time letters came to him from home; but his mother died, blessing him and loving him to the last; and then his friend—his once true friend—forgot the unhappy convict. Had the poor prisoner been able to divine the truth, he

would have seen that the self-reproaches of his friend paralysed his hand whenever he essayed to write the name of Cecil.

One had been constant to him, sending him such rude comfort as he could devise, and it was his letter which Cecil had asked for and received on his arrival at the "Six Horseshoes." Poor Jim Perks had known a little of prison life, and he remembered how he had welcomed anything from the world without his prison-walls. He had written therefore of all which he thought would interest his poor master, and now had directed Cecil to this quiet inn, where he could remain until he had communicated with his father or any other friend that was left him.

The other guest having changed his clothes, returned to the parlour, and was then supplied with another large glass of brandy-and-water for "the good of the house," as he assured Cecil, drawing a chair to the fire.

"A nice mess I've made of it to-day," the man said. "I was to have met some friends of mine at

Mucklebridge Races, and, fancying that I knew the country about here, got out at the wrong station. The only conveyance I could find was a tax-cart, and about a mile from here the brute of a horse went down and broke one of the shafts. As there appeared no chance of repairing it, I let the fellow draw me off half-a-crown and walked on. How far is it to Mucklebridge ?" he asked the hostess, who entered bringing the brandy-and-water.

"About six mile, sir," she replied.

"Six miles !" exclaimed the guest, adding an oath, "Why, the fellow told me I could see it from the end of this road !"

"And so you can, but it's six mile or better for all that," replied the hostess, about to leave the room.

"Then you must get me a cart, or something to take me on, for I must be there to-night," said the man.

"There's nothin' of the sort to be had here," replied the hostess. "My master's gone to the

races with our pony, and nobody knows when he'll get home,—I don't," and the hostess retired.

"Six miles," said the man; "I can never stump that; but I must be there to-night, as I'm nearly cleaned out. I got a little screwed last night, and somebody picked my pocket."

"I am sorry to hear you were so unfortunate," said Cecil, carelessly.

"What's the time I wonder?—looks about four or five o'clock. Well, there's no help for it. I must leave my bag and trust to Shanks's mare, I suppose," said the man. You ain't going that way, are you?"

"No," replied Cecil, "I came from there to-day."

"And didn't stay for the races? Well, the weather wasn't inviting."

Cecil did not think it necessary to reply to this observation, and so remained silent.

"I think you and I have met before," said the man. "My name's Kidderminster."

"I don't recall your name," answered Cecil, "and I don't remember where we met, if we ever did."

Neither did Kiddy; but he was quite right,—they had met before, when Kiddy was completing a government engagement two days after Cecil's removal to Dartmoor.

Kidderminster and Kiddy were assumed names of Mr. Brazier, Cecil's present companion. He had come of respectable parentage, but being addicted to low pleasures had frequently been "in trouble," until his misfortunes culminated in transportation. Since his emancipation he had followed less dangerous pursuits than those which had occupied his attention formerly, and being a man of some address, had been employed at the low London gambling-houses until he was promoted to be a "bonnet" at "The Benevolent." His "old and only failing," drunkenness, rendered his removal from that fashionable resort desirable, and he had been since then employed in the same capacity at "The Coventry" during the racing seasons, making a living at other times by equally disreputable pursuits. His remembrance of faces was very strong, and he was certain that he and

Cecil had met somewhere before, and upon something like an equality.

"I presume," said Kiddy, after a pause, "that you can't be travelling for pleasure such weather as this."

"I am certainly not travelling on any business that I know of," replied Cecil, smiling at the man's impertinence.

"Well, I should say not," replied Kiddy, looking Cecil over as though he were making an estimate of him. "You have the cut of a gentleman in spite of your velveteen and corduroys. Are you out of collar just now?"

"Out of what?" asked Cecil.

"I mean are you in Queer Street, as we say?" said Kiddy, impudently.

"I am not in very promising or prosperous circumstances, if that's what you mean," replied Cecil. Poor fellow! the past five years had left him little pride to take offence at simple rudeness.

"I thought not, and that was why I asked you

the question," said Kiddy. "I have had my share of the ups and downs of life, old boy, I can tell you, and if I can lend a helping-hand to any one, I never stand upon trifles in doing it." He rang the bell, and requested to have his glass refilled. "You seem to me, sir," he said, in a confidential tone, "to be a man who ought to make his way in the world if he got into the right groove. You drink tea, you're gentlemanly in your cut, and might pass muster in any society."

"I am obliged by your good opinion," said Cecil, not caring to enter into any controversy.

"Are you going to London?" asked Kiddy.

"Perhaps. I have not decided," replied Cecil.

"Then do decide. Come up to the little village, and if you will be guided by me, I'll put you in the way of living like a gentleman, and among gentlemen," said Kiddy.

"Your offer is a very liberal one," replied Cecil, as Kiddy paused and looked him earnestly in the face.

"I think I begin to remember where we met, but I won't ask for any confidence at present. I'll prove to you that I am not gammoning in what I say. Will you come and call on me next week? I shall be up for the winter."

"I can't promise that I will, as I am, as I told you, quite uncertain as to my future arrangements," replied Cecil.

"You are right to be cautious—another good quality which you have and I haven't," said Kiddy. "But I've taken a fancy to you, and I'm certain we can work together. So once for all, as I must be walking, I tell you as one gentleman should tell another, poor as I seem I can help you to get your foot on the ladder again, and then it will be your own fault if you don't climb, my boy."

"I can only thank you for your good intentions at present," answered Cecil.

"You needn't do that till you have proved them," said Kiddy, rather influenced by his potations. "But this may come to you as it has to

me. You may strive and strive to be the man you have been, and find that every hand will push you down. I don't do this to frighten you; but no one knows until he has lost his place in the world how hard it is to get back to it again. Now, should you have to experience the truth of what I say, look me up. Have you got a pocket-book? Very well. Now write down my address. You'll remember my name, so don't write that, if you please; but ask for me at No. 9, Dark Street, Clerkenwell. Good-day, sir; give me your hand! You may find worse friends on a day's march than old Kiddy."

They shook hands, and Mr. Kidderminster having made arrangements for the safe custody of his carpet-bag, started with "unequal steps and slow" to join his confederates of "The Coventry" at Mucklebridge.

Cecil was much impressed by the terrible picture which the man had sketched of his not improbable future. He had seen, young as he was, such a catastrophe overtake the unfortunate

and the criminal, and he had been both—yes—he could not acquit himself any more than the jury who had pronounced him “guilty” could have done, and discharged themselves of the oath they had taken to try him truly.

Sick at heart, weary and foot-sore, he went to his bed-room, and though he strove to shut away the fearful forebodings which possessed him, they would not let him sleep.

Soon there was noise of wheels, and such of the neighbouring farmers who had been to the races stopped at the “Six Horseshoes;” then voices, now loud in talk, now singing tipsily in chorus, declared how earnestly precautions they had been against damage by the weather.

The unseemly riot had the effect of distracting Cecil from his painful thoughts, and he slept; nor did he awake until a late hour in the morning.

CHAPTER VI.

CECIL ONCE AGAIN SEES THE FACE LIGHTED UP
AS HE SAW IT YEARS BEFORE IN PEMBERTON
WOOD, AND TAKES COUNSEL WITH THE OWNER
THEREOF.

ON the second day after Cecil's arrival at the "Six Horseshoes" a letter came addressed to "C. H., care of Mr. Harrison." The superscription was in a free commercial hand, and the enclosure was a letter written from Cecil to his father, Mr. Selwyn Hartley : on it was endorsed in large ungainly characters "Writer not known." A slight flush passed over Cecil's face as he threw the letter into the fire, and then resumed the perusal of a book which he had been reading.

From a vague sense of duty he had informed his father of his liberation, and the reception

which his letter had received was not altogether unexpected, yet he was not insensible to the bitter indignity of its return, and he read on without comprehending the meaning of the words upon the page. At last he closed the book, and resting his head upon his hand, sat thoughtfully contemplating the future which was before him. His stock of money was very small for a man who had to begin the world afresh with a tainted character and no friends, perhaps, but James Perks; a sorry patron truly, yet he alone had held him in remembrance during his long imprisonment.

Perhaps not so. His sister Clara would for their mother's sake retain some affectionate regard for her unhappy brother, and would have shown it long ago, no doubt, had she been a free agent, and not the born slave of his stony-hearted father.

Mr. Lockyer had abandoned him. The friend of his youth, who had stood by him in his great trouble, had changed at last, no doubt, and having

become the prudent, calculating man of business, saw nothing to be gained by a quixotic adherence to a wretched felon. As the world runs, this also was to be expected, and the conviction that such a change had taken place had been gradually strengthened during the last year or more of Cecil's servitude. Ruth and her mother would be likely to think as Mr. Lockyer directed them, and there was no other person in the wide world upon whom he had a claim for sympathy.

Cecil had thought thus often and often in his lonely cell and when wearing his prison dress, yet he had counted the hours almost when he could cast off the odious livery of guilt, and be free from the restraint which reminded him that he was a criminal.

To be free once more to wander where he listed!—to rise and to lie down at his own good pleasure!—to speak his thoughts aloud to any fellow-man who would share his companionship—became at last like hunger in his heart; and now the change had come, and he was at liberty!

Yes—"the world was all before him where to choose," and whither should he go? At whose door should he knock and say, "I am here a free man once again," and be sure of an invitation to enter as a friend? At one, only one, and that the cottage-door of the man who had been a gaol-bird in days gone by, but who had been rescued from the misery of guilt by a good angel — human, yet possessing an angel's goodness. There was no such beneficent influence about his dreary path to bid him hope and guide him back to a life of honest usefulness.

He almost despaired of the future, and his solitude became unbearable; so, paying his modest score, he left the "Six Horseshoes," determined to seek his only friend, and hear from him, perhaps, how a man should bear his lot when at the worst.

Cecil was a good walker, despite his lameness, and he traversed the sixteen miles which lay between the inn and the old town of Hilltown, arriving there at the close of day, and when the

light in the valley began to shine through the distant windows. The cottage of Jim Perks was nearer Old Court by two miles, and without waiting to refresh himself—did he fear recognition?—Cecil walked on and arrived there to find the door closed and no light to be seen within the cottage. He knocked more than once before the upper window was opened, and a woman's voice inquired his business.

"James Perks lives here, does he not?" asked Cecil.

"Yes, he does and he doesn't," answered the woman. "What may you want with him?"

"I want to see him, and my business is my own affair," said Cecil. "Is he within?"

"No, he isn't, and not likely to be till Saturday," said the woman. "He's out in Pemberton Wood, if you know where that is, burning charcoal and earning honest bread. I hopes you ain't come arter him for none of his old games. If you has you'll be mistook, that's all."

"May I ask who you are?" said Cecil.

"Yes you may. I'm Mrs Perks—Jim's missus; and I should like to know who you be, knocking here at this time o' night?" replied the woman.

"You shall know some day," said Cecil, "when you will give me a more civil welcome. Pember-ton Wood you say? How can I find Perks? He will be vexed if you don't tell me."

"Well, if I must I must," said the woman. "You must go up the middle ride in the wood" (how well Cecil remembered it!) "and take the second cutting on the right, when you'll see Jim's fire somewhere about there."

"Thanks," said Cecil; "I am sorry to have broken your sleep, but Jim will be glad to see me, be sure of that. Good-night, Mrs. Perks."

So the first door at which he had knocked had not been opened to him.

Pemberton Wood! Three miles on, if he could find the footpath across the meadows. He was becoming faint and weary, and regretted that he had not obtained some food in Hilltown. What house was that yonder, with lights shining

in the windows—one in a large bay-window and another in an upper chamber. A sudden heat changing to a sudden chill came over him as he looked once more upon Old Court. He could not go on nor take his eyes from the lighted windows, for he saw within the rooms of the old house memories of the past acted over by phantom players, and he had his part amongst them. Oh, shut them out, black night!—shut them away! Let him not see them in the dark shadows of the wood which he was approaching, nor up among the murky clouds drifting with the wind above his head, nor lying about his feet as he looked down upon the indistinguishable grass on which he trod.

They would not leave him, and he turned to look again, under a terrible fascination, at *her* lighted window, and within, his fancy saw a figure like to Kate Wycherly kneeling in prayer, and perhaps his name, he thought, might pass from her lips to Heaven.

He was weary and very faint, and so these

phantasies came into his brain until large cold drops of sweat gathered on his forehead and were followed by a distressing sickness which mastered all thought and fancies.

When Cecil recovered his consciousness he was leaning on a bridle-gate opening into Pemberton Wood, and passing through it he soon came to the ride along which he had ridden with Frank Lockyer on their first visit to Old Court. Cecil sighed as he thought of his false friend, and some sense of wrong mingled with the recollection, giving him fresh strength to push on in search of one who had proved faithful from gratitude for his own rescue.

Following the directions of Mrs. Perks, Cecil turned into the thicker part of the wood, the trees closing overhead making the clearing seem like a sylvan vault, and it was with some difficulty that he kept the track. At length he discerned, through an opening which had been recently made, a dull red glow, which served as a beacon to the turf-hut of Jim Perks ; but the difficulties

of progression were increased, as Cecil stumbled continually over the stubs of the newly-cut undergrowth. Fortunately a man replenished a fire over which a pot was suspended, and the blaze of the fresh fuel showed Cecil the worn path leading to the hut. As he advanced he saw by the light of the fire a man's face, every lineament distinctly shown as it had been years before in that same wood, and afterwards by the galley fire. The incident drew from him a slight ejaculation, loud enough however to attract the attention of the charcoal-burner, who was Jim Perks himself.

Cecil stopped, the light of the fire falling full upon him ; and though sorrow and suffering had worked their changes upon him, Jim instantly recognised his quondam master, and showed his delight at seeing him by a loud shout of joy,—loud enough to arouse his mate, who was sleeping “his turn” in the turf-hut beside the smouldering pile of charring wood which Jim was watching. Jim's manner then became more than usually

respectful, as though he was fearful of appearing to presume upon the circumstances which were within his knowledge, and which he knew had brought Cecil to him. Cecil perceived and was very grateful for this consideration. He remembered it afterwards, and Jim's life was made the happier for it.

"I'm sorry to have woke you, Dick," said Jim to his swarthy companion; "and if it'll make amends, you can go home to-night, as me and my friend here will mind the fire, and you can bring the shop-things in the morning. It ain't late, as the lights isn't out up at Hilltown."

"I ain't pertickler," replied Dick. "It's my club night, and I ain't been there this six months. What's wanted? Only bacon and coffee is there."

"And bacca," said Jim. "You better buy a short pipe or two, and I'll stand a couple o' pound of steak for breakfast."

The commissary soon availed himself of his mate's permission to be absent, and his heavy

boots were heard for some minutes after his departure crushing the withered sticks which lay in his path.

The coarse mess which Jim had been preparing for supper was heartily relished by the hungry Cecil, nor did he hesitate to accept with thankfulness the frowsy couch which Dick had recently vacated.

The church clock of Hilltown struck five as Cecil awoke, feverish and oppressed by the impure air of the hut, and drawing aside the piece of carpet hung at the entrance, came out into the fresh morning air. Jim had been also sleeping, perhaps, as he was busy banking up the pile of turf covering the charring wood, extinguishing two or three tongues of bright flame which were flickering on the surface.

"An early riser, Mr. Cecil," said Jim, with a smile. "I didn't expect to see you for a couple good hour at least, sir."

"I'm only a new apprentice to your trade, Jim," replied Cecil, holding his uncovered head up to

catch the breeze, "and can't quite accommodate myself to your limited dormitory."

"Oh, the hut, sir," said Jim ; "I ought to have thought of that. Rather close quarters for them as isn't used to it. We'll soon find you a ~~freshener~~ ;" and Jim started off with a tin bowl to a little stream which flowed a few paces away, and returned with it filled with clear water.

"Now, sir, have a skuish. Here's a bit of yallow soap, if you don't mind that, and a roughish towel, which I washed out while you was asleep, knowing that you gentry like such things in the morning. Some of my calling ain't so pertickler, and only washes up when they go down home or into the village. Dick, my mate, often laughs at me for making a clean face when it's not wanted, as he says."

Cecil gladly availed himself of Jim's rude preparations for a toilette. Poor fellow ! he had been long in a school where squeamishness was not taught as an accomplishment, for in those days prisons were not Criminal Hotels.

"Now, sir, what shall it be?" asked Jim. "A pot of hot coffee before I brile the bacon, or you can have a little drop of spirits if you like it better. We keep a drop for wet weather or frosty mornings, for ours is cruel cold work sometimes."

"I should like some coffee, but I can wait until your breakfast-time," replied Cecil.

But Jim was not to be denied, and he dived into his hut, and then, bringing out a queer-looking vessel, proceeded at once to prepare some coffee according to his own recipe. Cecil sat silently watching Jim, who now stirred his coffee, now stopped some smoking leak in his pile of charring wood, whistling occasionally as he moved about.

"Yours certainly must be a hard life," said Cecil, when Jim had given him a steaming pannikin of brown fluid sweetened with coarse moist sugar, "and yet you seem to enjoy it."

"Well, yes, sir, pretty well for that; but when I remember what I have got away from I am

thankful from the bottom of my heart," replied Jim, not observing that his words had called a momentary flush into Cecil's face. "Then you see, sir," he added, "I make out pretty well at this work, thanks to—Mr. Wycherly. He lets me contract for the burnin', and so the harder I works the more money I makes. You'd hardly believe it, sir, but I keeps a man—that Dick's my man. I pays his wages every Saturday night, and grubs him when he's at work; I do really, sir."

Poor Jim seemed to think his advance in the social scale was something so stupendous that Cecil might have difficulty in comprehending it.

"I am heartily glad to hear of your well-doing," replied Cecil, "and it gives me some hope that my own desperate fortunes may be surmounted."

"No doubt on it, sir," said Jim cheerfully, "no doubt on it."

"Although at present I don't see even the beginning of an improvement," continued Cecil,

"and to confess the truth, I have come to you for advice."

"To me, sir?" replied Jim, with some astonishment.

Cecil then informed his humble friend of all we already know: how Mr. Lockyer had neglected him, how his cruel father had returned his letter as from one unknown to him, and how he looked to the right and to the left and saw no road by which he could get back to the community of honourable men.

"No, my good and faithful old friend, you alone have been true to me, and I tell you that I see before me nothing to strive for with the least chance of success."

Jim sat looking at Cecil with great staring eyes, as though he had been dumbfounded by the desperate condition of his kind old master. At length he said, discharging seemingly a pent-up word—

"Ameriky!"

Cecil pointed to his maimed limb and shook his

head sorrowfully. "I could not labour as you did, and so earn my daily bread. I cannot take with me a character to obtain more fitting employment. No, I must starve at home, Jim, or thrive at home."

"And that scoundrel your father—I beg pardon for calling him so—shuts his door, turns his back upon his own flesh and blood that he might have saved and made a honourable gentleman and—" Jim concluded his speech very emphatically.

"No, Jim, he will not see me nor hear from me, as I have told you," replied Cecil. "Surely! surely! that man owes a heavy debt to our outraged nature, and must some day be called to judgment before he escapes into the grave! My murdered mother, for his unkindness killed her—his unkindness and my crime perhaps! O grant that I may be held free from blood-guiltiness!"

Cecil sank upon his knees and prayed aloud, Jim sitting beside him with his rough black hands clasped together.

"Mr. Cecil," Jim said, when Cecil ceased to speak, "you mustn't take on in this way, or you will never fight out of your trouble. What you did—I have heard a dozen people say so, and one good person more than once—what you did, sir, wasn't a crime. It was a foolish ill-considered thing, and dearly has you paid the penalty of the law. Your mother loved you to the last, and I heard from her who sat by her bedside when she died, that her last words was your name and pray God bless you. No, sir, your father hunted the life out of her, and but for a wicked oath I took, she should have had revenge. You should have had revenge before this."

"Let him alone! Let him alone, my friend," said Cecil. "His sins will yet find him out, and may they bring repentance! Come, I am keeping you from your work; keeping you from your breakfast. Give me something to do. Let me cut some wood—I see a hatchet yonder;" and Cecil set to work to make up the fire, whilst Jim rubbed his frying-pan with a bunch of

grass, preparatory to frying some bacon, as the readiest mode of cooking it with his limited *cuisine*.

Their meal was soon over, their conversation not retarding it, as both were occupied with their own thoughts.

"And now, sir," said Jim, "as I see Dick is crossing the ten-acre there, what do you mean to do?"

"I can't decide upon any course. I have partly made up my mind to go on to London. I met a man who promised very liberally to find me some employment; I did not care to inquire what at the time, but I can find no course for myself, and he may possibly direct me. There is his address, No. 9, Dark Street, Clerkenwell."

"Clerkenwell!" said Jim. "That's a queer neighbourhood, sir, but where you'll not be likely to meet any of your old acquaintances. You wouldn't like to go to my cottage, I suppose?"

"No; thank you, Jim, for the offer though," replied Cecil, smiling gravely. "It is the only

friendly door I would knock at, my good fellow. No, I cannot stay near *there*," and he pointed in the direction of Old Court.

"Well, perhaps not," said Jim thoughtfully. "London's the best place for you at present. Please write down that place in Clerkenwell and give it to me. You'll leave word there, sir, please, where I can find you. I think I may want to see you."

"What do you mean?" asked Cecil sharply. "You will not mention—I mean—I wish you to keep our meeting a secret from every one. Jim, promise that."

"Not from your father, sir, should I chance to see him," replied Jim, equivocating, perhaps. "I go to London sometimes on business, and I might meet him in the streets."

"The stones on which you tread would be as easily moved as that bad man!" said Cecil. "I hear your mate coming; I shall leave by the first train from Hilltown. Few, I fancy, would recognise me as you did, and I must learn to be

indifferent to such accidents, or I shall do nothing."

Shortly after Dick's return Cecil took his departure, and no sooner was he out of sight than Jim announced his intention of going off for the morning, having to see the bailiff at Old Court.

Jim did not tell the truth to his man Dick, as he took the shortest way to his own cottage, and there presented himself an unexpected pleasure, although he was not so welcome as he might have been had it not been Mrs. Perks's washing-day. Jim did not interrupt the busy housewife further than by giving her a good conjugal kiss, and to inquire after the child, who was away at a dame's school, and then he went up to the room where he kept his pens, ink, and paper—such matters being of no particular use to Mrs. Perks, except to amuse the child and disturb at times her husband's equanimity. After much cogitation and squaring of elbows, sucking of pen and other preparations usual with persons unaccustomed to letter-writing, Jim performed as follows :—

"HONORD MADAM,

"i make bold to let you know that i am
com from work and am at cotage and I make bold
to send this by missus Perks to aste you to be so
kind as to see me at wunst as i want to aste you
adwice and it is wanted at wunst on a pteckiler
account if it is to do any good. i will com to old
court if you says com if you do not i shall wate
were I am

"your obejent servant

"JAMES PERKS."

It required more than one attempt to produce
this remarkable epistle, and when it was carefully
folded and fastened with a large red wafer it was
addressed to

"MISS WYCHERLY

old court "

to the writer's evident relief and satisfaction.

Mrs. Perks's consternation was extreme when
Jim requested her to abandon her washing-tub

clean herself, and take his letter to Old Court ; and Jim having assured his wife that all further remonstrance was vain, and that he would attend to the clothes boiling in the copper, and hang out those to dry which were sufficiently advanced for that process, she gave apparently a reluctant consent : urged thereto, if the truth must be told, by the conviction that a good luncheon of bread and cheese and ale awaited her, and possibly a shilling.

Mrs. Perks was therefore soon on her road to Old Court, and Jim being a handy fellow, discharged his part of the contract with great skill and fidelity, moreover cleaning the cottage windows, a job which Mrs. Perks disliked—she always protested—"as bad as pison." It is clear that she had never read the "Spectator," or else that Mr. Perks was a bad representative of the amorous footman, at the outside of the glass, whose courtship so amused our undying old friend with the short face.

CHAPTER VII.

CECIL LOOKS UP MR. KIDDY, AND HEARS AND MAKES REVELATIONS.

MISS WYCHERLY had elected to call at the cottage, to Mrs. Perks's great discomfiture, but Jim proceeded to take the lady up-stairs, to interfere as little as possible with the family wash.

Accordingly when Kate arrived Jim begged of her to excuse the state of things below, and to honour him by stepping up-stairs, where they could talk with less interruption. Jim apologised in his rough way for the liberty he had taken in requesting this interview, and assured Miss Wycherly that only his interest for another would have emboldened him to make the request.

Miss Wycherley coloured slightly, and encouraged Jim to proceed. —

Jim told her that a certain person had left the place where he had been so long (Jim did not say that he had seen Cecil), and it had come to his knowledge that the cruel father had refused to see the son, and had returned Cecil's letter as coming from one unknown to him. Such wicked conduct Jim thought should not go unpunished, and if the father continued to repudiate his son, Jim wished to be the avenger. For years and years he had kept a secret, at times nearly revealing it, but always restrained from doing so by the remembrance of a fearful oath which he had taken, and which he feared to break. He had taken that oath not knowing at the time what he did or the wrong he was doing to others, and though his silence had been productive of short-lived good to himself he had resisted the temptation to reveal what he knew, even when it might have saved him from much of the distress which he had known. His conscience condemned him for the part which he had taken and for the silence which he had preserved, and he now desired to

know if Miss Wycherly considered that he was bound to keep this wicked oath, when to declare those things which were within his knowledge would punish a wicked man and do justice to others.

Kate sat silent for a few minutes, and then answered him—

“I cannot believe that such an obligation can be binding upon any one, being, as you say, to conceal wrong to others and to shelter the wrong doer. I waited before I answered you, because I feared that, guessing at the man to whom you are bound, I should allow my decision to be influenced by feeling rather than conviction. I am sure now that if I were in your place, James, I should do right to others, and believe that I was guilty only as long as I was silent.”

“What a load them words takes from me!” said Jim, clasping his hands together; “and now, miss, please hear what I have to say, and tell me how I should go on.

“When Mr. Selwyn was on his death-bed and

making his will, Mr. Hartley was the man he employed to do it for him. Well, miss, it was my ill-luck to be sent over from Old Court, to ask how Mr. Selwyn was, and while I was waiting about the place this Mr. Hartley came to me in the yard and asked me if I could write. It would have been a blessed thing for me if I had never learned to write, seeing the bad use I have made of it. Well, I told him that I could, and he then said, 'Wait a little while, I shall want you.' He then went up-stairs, and came down again and told me and old Susan, Mr. Selwyn's housekeeper, that we was to witness his name to his will. Hartley then went up-stairs again, and we thinking we was to follow him, went up too, but finding the bed-room door shut we waited on the landing outside. Presently old Susan left me by myself, and as I stood there I heard Mr. Hartley begin to read in a loud voice Mr. Selwyn's will to him. When he had done we was called in and saw Mr. Selwyn sign his name, and we signed ours and left the room. Mr. Hartley twice on that day gave me

money ; had he not done that perhaps I should not have thought much of what I had heard or done, but he told me not to say at Old Court what had been doing at Ashtree Farm. I wish I had ! I wish I had ! for I lost a good master's favour and tied myself to a bad man, and suffered for it. Only for you, miss, I——”

“Do not speak of me,” said Kate. “I see nothing very wrong in what you have told me. It would have been better, perhaps, if you had told my father.”

“Better ! an awful deal better, for all concerned in that business, as you will say presently, miss,” replied Jim. “When Mr. Selwyn died, his will was read and everybody was surprised that he should have left nearly all his money away from his own sister's sons and give it to his wife's nephew. As soon as I heard the people talk of this I set to thinkin' of what I had heard outside the room, and I remember clear as clear could be that Mr. Selwyn's will, which I heard read aloud by Mr. Hartley, gave share and share alike, and that the

will must have been changed at the bed-side of the dying man, and that he had signed his name, and we ours, to a wrong paper——”

“My father always suspected as much!” cried Kate.

“He was right, miss; for one night, just afore the sale at Elm Tree Farm, when I was over there to keep old Susan company, Mr. Hartley came down late at night rather and slept in the bedroom. I knew I had got him in my hands and so —you won’t think worse of me for what I did than I do of myself—I went to his room down the stair, that led to the servants’ room, in Mrs. Selwyn’s time, and taxed him with what he had done. He shook at first like a man with ague, but after a time he came round to himself, and then he told me I couldn’t prove my words, that no judge or jury would believe me, and that what I said was a lie. When he said that I caught hold of him, and would have struck him; but he bid me be quiet and it should be for my good.”

"This is a very fearful story, James," said Kate.

"It is, miss, and I have had it locked up in my breast all these years and feared to speak on it, but it shall all out now. He told me I couldn't prove my words, even if they was true; but rather than he should have law and words with his relations he would give me a hundred pounds. A hundred pounds was a terrible large sum in my eyes, and was I very bad to take it?"

"It was indeed a great temptation," replied Kate.

"It was, and I took it, miss," said Jim, looking down upon the floor. "It did me no good, it only let me do all kinds of evil, and was soon spent. I went to him for more, and then he made me swear an oath——"

"Do not repeat it," said Kate.

"No, miss, not to your ears, only to his some day," replied Jim. "I spent and went again and again, always getting less money and harder words, until he found out someway—from something I

said perhaps in drink—that I was bound by my oath, and then he turned his back upon me and left me to starve, as I deserved to do."

"What do you propose to do, now?" asked Kate calmly.

"I don't know, miss; I want you to tell me. I have thought that it is too late to get myself believed, and to make this bad man pay back to them he robbed what is their due."

"I am afraid so."

"And then I have thought this. I have thought that I would go to him and tell him that my oath was nothing, that I would tell all I knew even if no good came of it, but to let the world know what a villain he was; but I would hold my tongue until I died if he would do what was right to Mr. Cecil, and give him a home and a start again."

"Do you think Mr. Cecil would accept of such help?" asked Kate, colouring deeply. "He once refused it."

"Perhaps not," replied Jim sadly. "I don't

think he would, though his case is very desperate."

Kate rose and looked out of the window. After a pause she said—

"Do nothing rashly, James. I will think over what you have told me. It is a terrible story, certainly, and the consequences of the evil done have been very sad—very miserable. Have you anything else to say to me?"

Jim guessed the meaning of that question, but he answered,

"No, miss, nothing just now. I am going to London in a day or two, and I may ask to see you when I come back."

"We also are going to London," said Kate, "for a month or two. We leave Old Court tomorrow. If I should think it advisable to acquaint my father with what you have told me, may I do so?"

"Do as you please, miss, quite as you please; but master don't judge me kindly as you do," said Jim.

" You must own that he has not judged you unjustly," replied Kate. " Your interests are safe with me, James."

As Kate walked homeward she thought of Cecil. With such a father, was it wonderful that he should have erred when so sorely tempted? Was not his refusal to share that bad man's fortunes an evidence of his own innate love of what is honourable and good? For what had he striven? To make a home—a refuge for that devoted mother who had trained him to reject such counsels as his father must have given him,—to rescue her from the daily misery of association with one so brutal and mean as the man who lived only for his own selfish ends, regardless of all the duties of husband and of father. Frank Lockyer had said this again and again. And for one fault was Cecil to be abandoned to absolute destruction? How could he be rescued? Ah! how? Her father, she believed, was not to be influenced in 'Cecil's favour, even by her. Mr. Lockyer?—He had placed a barrier between her-

self and him, and she mistrusted his generosity, knowing how he had abandoned his early friend, and from what an unworthy motive. Mrs. Masham?—Yes, perhaps she might be inclined to help the poor outcast.

There was one other in whose mind Cecil was uppermost—Jim Perks, and he resolved to go at once to him, and reveal all that he had told to Kate, and induce him to use the knowledge in obtaining justice for Mrs. Masham and Mr. Garrett, not doubting but their gratitude would compel them to befriend Cecil. With this determination Jim started for London next day.

In the meantime, Cecil, despairing almost of any escape from his present wretchedness, went in pursuit of Mr. Kidderminster. The street to which he had been directed was in one of the lowest parts of Clerkenwell, and when he found the number of the house Kiddy had given him, he was in doubt whether the man had not been jesting with him.

It was evening when Cecil discovered it, and

the lower part of the house was lighted up with numerous parti-coloured illumination lamps, showing two large placards, on which were rude paintings of grotesque figures, intending to represent portraits of "Joey Muffins and Lizzy Lee, in character." Cecil at once recognised the place as a "Penny Theatre," or "Gaff," as it was popularly called; and as "the doors" were not yet opened, the entrance was crowded with young lads and girls, whose appearance was indicative of their ordinary pursuits, which were neither honest nor respectable. As Cecil paused in front of the house, a man who was bawling out the attractions of the entertainment to be seen within, invited him to "invest a penny to hear the best songs, comic and sentimental, combined with a clog hornpipe and a pantomime."

Cecil declined the invitation by a shake of the head, but as he continued to stare listlessly at the group within, the man approached him, and making a comic bow, inquired "If he was learning to spell, and warn't afraid of catching cold."

Utterly depressed and occupied by his own sad thoughts, Cecil did not notice the vulgar irony of his questioner, and replied :

"I came to see somebody in this house, but I am afraid I must have made a mistake, or have been sent wrong. Do you chance to know Mr. Kidderminster?"

"Oh, you want him," said the man. "You're all right—Kiddy lives on the second floor, but he's just gone out for his regulars. Are you a friend of his'n?"

"I know him," answered Cecil, "and I have called because he asked me. I will wait a little while."

"I'd better send to him," said the man. "Here, one of you boys—you Carrots—run to the 'Compasses' and tell Mr. Kiddy he's wanted. You shall go in for nothin' when you come back; and perhaps the gent will give you a penny into the bargain."

A sharp, red-haired lad darted off with this message, and returned almost immediately

to say "Mr. Kiddy would come when he'd finished."

"Kiddy isn't very particular about time when he's got a pal to drink with," said the man, "so you'd better go up to my room till he comes, unless you'll see the performance—but we shan't begin for five minutes. Here, come with me;" adding, "Now then, you sirs, clear away a bit," but not receiving ready compliance with his command, proceeded very unceremoniously to force the crowd aside, and made his way, followed by Cecil, to the stairs leading to the theatre. Ascending, they came to a large room in which were two four-post bedsteads, the hangings and counterpanes scrupulously clean, as was a young woman seated by a fire nursing a child.

"Here's a gent waiting for Mr. Kiddy, my dear," said the man; "and as he's engaged at the 'Compasses,' and on course is uncertain, I've asked the gent to sit down here till he comes."

The young woman smiled and bowed her head, and Cecil saw that she was dressed to correspond

with one of the paintings which had attracted his attention at the door. This was therefore "Lizzie Lee."

Before the manager could leave the room a door opened, and a man with a highly ruddled face, enormous shirt collars, a long flaxen wig, and arranged in an eccentric coat and pantaloons, appeared for a moment, announcing, in an authoritative tone,—“I’m ready—begin.”

“That’s Joey Muffins,” said the manager rather confidentially to Cecil. “First rate celebrity, and got a cartload of dresses. Only does two turns a night here for thirty bob a-week.”

The manager retired, leaving Cecil at a loss to comprehend the importance of this last communication.

The rush up the stairs—the clamour of voices in an adjoining room, announced that the doors were open, and the audience scrambling for places. Cecil began to feel an interest in the proceedings; his mind had been possessed with one train of painful thought so long, that the novelty of the

scene around him came as a relief, and Lizzie Lee having hushed her infant prodigy (it was one in her eyes) to sleep replied to an inquiry of Cecil, "That the hacobats was about to exhibit, and he could go into the refreshment stall and see 'em."

As Mr. Kiddy still lingered at the "Compasses," Cecil accepted the courtesy of Lizzie Lee, and was rather startled at what he saw when introduced into the theatre.

Some hundred lads and girls—none apparently older than eighteen—were crowded together in a large room. At one end of the apartment was a platform ornamented with red drapery. Upon this platform the singing, dancing, and posturing were displayed, and, strange to say, considering the character of the place and the audience, the words and gestures, though coarse, were moderately decent.

There was evil teaching, however, in much that was said and sung, and the deeds of bold highwaymen and abandoned women were the themes most applauded by the youthful reprobates.

The temporary relief from his gloomy thoughts which Cecil had found in contemplating this new phase of life, soon passed, and the terrible reflection came that such scenes as he was witnessing, such associates as he looked upon, were familiar to the man whom he now sought to learn how to live—how to escape from despair.

Nearly half an hour had passed before Mr. Kiddy could leave the "Compasses," and his inflamed eyes and face told how he had been employing himself. He was not tipsy, however—he had been "screwing up," as he said, and this operation had to be frequently performed during the day, as the natural consequence of such stimulating appliances was to induce a recurrence of "running down" (his own phrase), to the great profit of the "Compasses."

Kiddy was evidently surprised to see Cecil. He was pleased also, to judge by the warmth and heartiness of the welcome which he gave him.

"This is friendly—friendly," said Kiddy, shaking

Cecil by the hand, which he had given very reluctantly. "Come up to my crib, unless you want to see any more of this nonsense."

As Cecil was thoroughly satisfied with what he had seen, he followed Kiddy to his room on the second floor, and after a light had been obtained, found the apartment contrasted very unfavourably with that of Lizzie Lee.

The bed had not been made, and there was a general litter, not indicative of a love of order in Mr. Kiddy. However, the table was soon cleared of its incumbrances, and then supplied with glasses and a bottle (brought home from the "Compasses"), without which aid to conversation Mr. Kiddy never felt at his ease.

Several indifferent matters having been disposed of, Kiddy laid down the pipe which he had been smoking, and resting his chin upon his hands folded on the table, he looked Cecil steadfastly in the face for some moments. Having finished his scrutiny, he said—

"If we are to be of any service to each

other; Mr. Harrison, we must have confidence to begin with." He paused, and resumed his scrutiny.

"Well?" replied Cecil, rather embarrassed by Kiddy's proceedings.

"I think I have remembered where we met before. About three years ago I fancy we were both under a cloud—both a burthen upon our country, Mr. Harrison."

Cecil felt the blood mount into his face, and his heart beat audibly,

"Am I right?" asked Kiddy; but as Cecil did not reply he added: "To speak more plainly, I think we were both serving out our time at Dartmoor together? You see I am making the first confidence. I am right, am I not?"

Cecil looked down as he replied, "Yes, I was there."

"How long have you been away, may I ask?" said Kiddy.

"About six days," returned Cecil softly.

"And you've learned a good deal during that

short time, I fancy, Mr. Harrison," said Kiddy.
"I know that I did."

"I don't quite understand you," observed Cecil.

"Lucky for you if you haven't learned what the world's made of, my young friend. But I think you have or we should not be sitting here together in Clerkenwell, or have met at a 'penny gaff.' Shall I tell you what you have learned!"

Cecil continued silent.

"You have learned—as I did once on a time—that you have lost, in the few years you've been away from society, friends, kinsfolk, acquaintance, and that the character you have brought away from your last place makes honest men and undiscovered rogues shut their doors in your face, and perhaps set the house-dog at you, if they keep one."

Cecil shook his head and sighed heavily.

"Ah! I thought you had read a page or two out of the old book. It's nearly always the same. Some are lucky enough to find friends and get away from the damnable life which waits most

of us outside Dartmoor walls, unless one shows a bold front to the world, and fights it as though it were a wild beast. Strike fair or foul ! Conquer some way !

Cecil rose up and paced the room, holding his head in his hands. His companion did not interrupt him for some time. He then said,— “These are hard things to hear, but I'll be bound you have thought them over since you took off the Dartmoor livery. And why do I say them to you ? To make us friends and prosperous men, perhaps, if you will take my counsel.”

“What is it ?” asked Cecil hoarsely, his face almost rigid with mental agony.

“What were you lagged for ?” said Kiddy abruptly.

Cecil did not answer.

“Don't be shy ! I can match anything you have done, I'll be bound, Mr. Harrison,” said Kiddy, laughing. “I have been at nearly all in the ring until I grew wiser and learned to live without any fear of judge and jury !”

" Honestly ? " said Cecil .

" Yes—honestly, as things go," replied Kiddy, with a sneer, " and if I could keep from this—my old and only serious failing—this fascinating bottle, I could live like a great many other gentlemen. Well ; so you don't like to tell me what was your little game ? "

" I was convicted of forgery," said Cecil, colouring deeply, even to name his crime to the old gaol bird his companion. And then the poor culprit told all his story, all the temptation which led him into guilt—all that he had suffered when he was at convict work, and when he came forth again a free man and found he had one only friend, and he a gaol bird also, but more faithful he than the friend of his youth, and kinder far than the stony-hearted man who had been a father only in name.

When Cecil had finished, Mr. Kiddy gave vent to some very strong expressions, and almost volunteered to terminate Mr. Selwyn Hartley's worthless existence. The bottle had much to do with the fervour of his indignation.

"I thought I wasn't far wrong in my guess, Mr. Harrison," continued Mr. Kiddy. "I knew when I met you that you had kept better society than your toggery indicated. I can tell the cut of a gentleman at any time. And now you've had to learn the old hard lesson—no friends, no relations to hold one the helping hand when once you have had the gaol fever. Where's the wonder that men don't reform, as they call it, but grow harder and savager, and live as they can, no matter who pays the reckoning? I know what such treatment has made me, who might have been an honest gentleman."

This long and energetic speech drove Mr. Kiddy to his old and only failing.

The church clock struck eleven, and Cecil remembered that he had no lodging.

"I'll manage that for you," said Kiddy. "I suppose cheapness is a consideration—cheapness and privacy. I'll find you good quarters where you will be safe from inward and outward Philistines, and that's something to say in Clerkenwell.

We'll do a little shopping as we go along, for I fancy housekeeping will come strange to you after having had board and lodging found you so long. We'll take the 'Compasses' in our way and replenish my bottle, for the stuff they sell about here is abominable."

Cecil had not the inclination or the energy to reply, but followed Kiddy into the street, after that person had locked the door of his room and put the key into his pocket.

CHAPTER VIII

CECIL GOES TO NEW LODGINGS IN CLERKENWELL.—JIM PERKS FINDS A NURSE FOR THE SICK MAN.

THE “penny gaff” was closed when Cecil began his night walk through Clerkenwell; and after the “Compasses” had been visited by his conductor, Mr. Kiddy, on they went through “dingy swarming alleys crowded with tattered women and unwashed, lazy men clustering round the doors of low-browed public-houses, or seated in unwindowed shops frowsy with piles of rubbish or displaying coarse and greasy food;” through other streets where parts of houses had fallen down, allowing a little more air to penetrate among the foul inhabitants, beggars, costermongers, tinkers, sack-makers, watercress girls, and still more down-

beaten people, unknown, uncared-for, except by their own order and the self-denying missionary. Others there are poorer, more degraded still, unrecognised by all human sympathy, except that of the Bible-woman, almost as poor as themselves, but who has been made the instrument to carry the message of God into these dreadful abodes of dreadful people. And this, in London, wealthy beyond count, world-famous, and wherein hundreds of churches abound, and millions of people profess to follow the teaching of the Bible.

What a walk for an almost hopeless, despondent man to take in the gloom of night ! What scenes for one who felt himself an outcast to witness for the first time, and when his own future was hidden in impenetrable darkness !

Mr. Kiddy made a few small purchases of food and candles, as they went along, and then in about half an hour stopped at a dingy-looking house, which must, at some remote time, have been a merchant's dwelling. The door opened into a large passage leading to a flight of well-worn

stairs, and the light from the guttering candle which a slip-shod girl carried before them showed that the dirty paneling of the staircase was broken in many places.

The landlord of the house and his wife occupied the first floor, and Cecil was made conscious of a most unsavoury odour, as the girl asked him and Mr. Kiddy into the presence of her master and mistress.

The state of the room was untidy in the extreme. In one corner stood a large dirty bedstead, and by its side a chair, on which had been placed a frying-pan, greasy from recent use. There were other chairs, some broken, and a table strewn with cups, plates and pewter pots. The windows had been partly darkened with whitewash; and the whole scene was thrown into *chiaroscuro* by the flame of a smoky lamp hung over the mantelpiece. The man and woman were both smoking rank tobacco, and appeared to be muddled almost to drunkenness.

They recognised Mr. Kiddy, however, as a

former lodger, and Cecil heard with some anxiety that a certain room was unoccupied and could be had for three shillings a week or sixpence a night, and extras for fire and attendance. Without consulting Cecil, Mr. Kiddy accepted these terms for his friend, and the slip-shod girl then led the way up another flight of stairs into a room which, to Cecil's surprise and pleasure, appeared to be clean in contrast to the one which they had just quitted.

Mr. Kiddy having lighted one of the candles he had brought with him, and ordered the girl to make a fire and bring some fresh water, sat himself down as though he considered himself the man in possession, and invited Cecil to do the same.

"They're a queer lot, old Barker and his wife, but I believe they are the only honest people in the neighbourhood. You must look after yourself, and I've no doubt you will be comfortable when you are used to the place."

When the girl had lighted the fire and brought

the water, Kiddy produced his old and only failing from his pocket, and having taken two pewter cups from a cupboard in the room, proceeded to mix two beakers of grog, and then lighted his pipe.

"I've been thinking," said he, "as we came along, that it was hardly fair of me to pump you as to the cause of your trouble, without letting you into my secrets, and, as I said before, mutual confidence is necessary to successful co-operation."

Mr. Kiddy then told Cecil so much of himself as we already know, concealing, as is usual with men of his class, his real name, as though some sense of shame still remained ; some feeling of regard for those whom he had disgraced by his wicked life.

"I have been at the bottom of the ladder, you see," he added, "even among the Romaneys—the Didycoys—and lived as they lived worse than a wild beast at times ; at others, feasting on the fat of the land if it came in our way. I've been among

the half-breeds—the worst of the Romaneys. They're a selfish, brutal, cruel lot when prosperous, and fawning, mean, and deceitful when luck's against them. I was ashamed of my company ; and left them—and got into trouble on my own account. I have heard many songs about a gipsy's life, but if they who wrote them had ever been at a Didycy's switching, or wedding, as I was once, in the Forest of Dean, they'd burn their songs in disgust."

Cecil was shocked at the man's revelations—shocked to know that he had sought his companionship.

" Well, after I left Dartmoor, I resolved to turn over a new leaf, and luckily I found some old pals who had been more fortunate than myself, and they helped me to do it. I now propose to you to follow my example."

" What am I to do ? " asked Cecil.

" You have a good appearance—can talk like a gentleman, and have a clear head upon your shoulders, and what is better, or as good as all,

you haven't my 'old and only failing.' It has kept me down, and will, I suppose, bury me some day."

The moral to this speech was a deep draught of his enemy.

"Well, sir," continued Mr. Kiddy in the tone of a man about to confer an obligation, "I can introduce you to a good thing; to men of money — men who associate with tip-top swells and spend many a pleasant hour in their company. They keep a bank in the neighbourhood of St. James—a bank for hazard and roulette; and I will engage that they shall give you a place at the table to stimulate the play, to encourage *les autres*, as we say."

"In fact, to become what is called a bonnet, Mr. Kidderminster?" said Cecil rising.

"Exactly," replied Kiddy, not understanding the indignation he had excited, "the pay is good and the perquisites agreeable."

His pipe was out, the ashes required removing and the bowl refilling, and whilst he was

engaged in these operations Cecil mastered his emotion.

“Why should I resent this man’s proposal ?” he thought. “He believes he is doing me a service, and I came to him willingly, unconstrained, to ask his counsel. To be thus understood is part of my punishment, and I must bear it.”

Mr. Kiddy then went on to narrate some of his own clever knaveries and to draw diagrams on the table with his wet finger of his mode of doctoring cards, by which honours could be cut or avoided at will ; and expressed his regret that, not having three thimbles and a pea, he could not initiate Cecil into the mysteries of the delightful mystery of thimble-rig. At last he rose to take his departure, and having pocketed his old and only failing, he bade Cecil good night, and promised to call upon him early the next day —“say about one.” This was tipsily said, and he blundered down the old uneven stairs into the street.

When Cecil was alone, his agony became intense, as never until then had he felt the fulness of his degradation.

"Is this man's disgraceful life," he thought, "my only escape from beggary or death? Welcome both a hundred times before such a shameful existence! I am young, have health and strong limbs, and if I must earn my daily bread by the labour of my hands, I shall be sharing the lot of thousands of honourable men." And then he remembered how vainly Perks had striven when his good name was lost, until one guardian angel came to his rescue.

Poor Cecil! he had no such hope as that, and yet, perhaps, there was one gentle spirit mourning for his errors and remembering his virtues. He was almost without comfort, and throwing himself upon his bed, he tried in vain to sleep, until he recalled the early teachings of his mother, and remembering them, prayed and slept.

Mr. Kiddy remembered his promise in the

morning and was at his door when Perks came to inquire for Cecil. Mr. Kiddy recognised the name and gave Jim the necessary information to find Cecil, as he himself had a preliminary call to make at the "Compasses," and there his old and only failing detained him for the rest of the day.

With some difficulty Jim found Cecil's wretched lodging, which looked even worse by daylight than it had done the preceding night.

Mr. Barker was rather reserved in admitting that he had such a lodger as Jim was in search of, as Mr. Barker was a close man, and had had good reasons at times to be reticent; but the name of Mr. Kiddy removed his scruples, and Jim was shown up-stairs. He found Cecil very ill and depressed. His limbs were aching, heats and shiverings succeeded each other, no doubt from cold taken in the hut, and his subsequent anxiety had also done its work, so that Jim's visit was made most opportunely.

Though it was mid-day the room had been un-

cared for by the slip-shod maid ; the table was strewn with the ashes from Kiddy's pipe, the pewter-beakers, and the spoutless jug ; the grate was fireless, and the soiled broken furniture of the room showed to disadvantage in the little sunlight which struggled through the dirty window-panes on to the carpetless floor. Jim had been used to rougher lodging in his time, but he knew what condition of fortunes was implied by all that he saw, and how much Cecil, who had been gently nurtured, must suffer from such unmistakable indications of the terrible change which had overtaken him.

Cecil heard some one moving in his room, but had scarcely the power or the desire to ask "Who was there ?"

"Me, sir," answered Jim cheerily, and the voice sounded indeed like the voice of a friend. "Me sir; I told you I war comin' up to London, and should call. I should have had a job to have found you out if I hadn't lighted on Mr. Kidd-muster. He told me how to find this place, and

would ha' comed wi' me but he'd petickler busi-
ness at a public-house, and so I comed on without
'im."

"It is very kind of you, Perks, not to desert
me altogether," said Cecil, with his face to the
wall.

"Kind? not a bit on't, sir; but for you takin'
me by the hand I should have been dead and
buried afore this among them Yankees. But you
trusted me when no one else would, and that
trust got me honest work and a home, and made
a man of me. I've been a bad fellow and de-
served all I got of gaol and ill words; and they'd
have made me no better but for— Well, I won't
worry you, sir, with mysel', but just put the place
a bit tidy. You arn't had no breakfast yet I take
it?" said Jim, clearing the table and then search-
ing in the cupboard. "I don't see no kind-
ling anywheres, and—" after a silent survey of the
empty shelves—"no nothin'."

"I can't eat," said Cecil, "I am too ill; but I
should like a glass of water."

"To be sure ; but this has been standin' in this stifling place all night. I seed a pump not far from here as I comed along, and then I'll kindle the fire when I come back."

"If you tell the people below the servant will light the fire ; they are to find attendance," said Cecil feebly.

"O yes—yes ; I should ha' thought so by the look of the place," replied Jim. "I'll tell him to go for the water."

Jim informed Mr. and Mrs. Barker of Cecil's requirements, and the two commenced a series of shouts which at length produced "their gal" from the hidden depths of the old house, and having given her instructions as to limitation of fuel, sent her to light Cecil's fire. Jim found her there on his return, and was much dissatisfied with her proceedings after he had given Cecil a glass of water, the glass having been bought on his way.

"I say, my lass, you don't seem to be a good hand at that work," said Jim. "Two sticks and

a cinder won't make much o' a fire. You go and get some more coals and wood, there's a good lass."

"Mustn't," replied the girl. "I should get a topper if I was to try."

"Oh! never mind the topper," said Jim; "I'll give you tuppence for a good lump or two of coal and a tidyish bit of wood."

"Tuppence?" asked the girl incredulously. "Well, I must bring them up in my apron, then. You will give me the tuppence?"

"Honour bright!" said Jim.

"Then I'll pick out lumping ones," replied the girl, showing a set of very white teeth, which appeared to advantage, like a negro's, from the darkness of her skin.

Jim had not confined himself to procuring pump-water, as he brought in with him the materials for a comfortable breakfast (he must have had some foreknowledge of the neighbourhood to have procured them so readily), and the fire having been made to his satisfaction, he rewarded

the girl and dismissed her from further attendance, promising her another penny if she would wash her face before again presenting herself. The bribe was too small.

Cecil could take nothing but a little tea, swallowing even that with difficulty, and Jim began to suspect that he was very ill.

"I am indeed sick, sick at heart, my good, kind fellow," said Cecil, in reply to Jim's inquiries, "and, if it be God's will, I would rather die than live."

"On course you feel that way just at present," replied Jim, "I ha' felt so in my time; but I fought on, and now I've a good home and wife, and a child that I loves wi' all my heart. Why mayn't you have the same when you've fit it out?"

"How to begin?" said Cecil. "Whichever way I look I see an insurmountable barrier. I would work as you work if I could, but who will employ me? My lameness unfits me for that last resource of many desperate men—the army; and

I seem to be utterly without friends—without hope!"

Jim knew what Cecil said was in part true, and as his own eloquence was limited he did not trust himself to aggravate Cecil's despondency by an ineffectual attempt to disprove the cause of it. Having put the room in order—pausing frequently, as though meditating upon some scheme which was seething in his brain—he stole gently to the bedside to see if Cecil slept; but finding that he was lying gazing vacantly at the wall, Jim said softly:—

"Mr. Cecil, I am going away for half an hour or so; but I'll be back then; and, if you please, I'll bring a doctor in with me."

"That will be useless," replied Cecil. "I know my ailment, and know also that no human skill can give me relief—at least such as you propose. Jim Perks, I am lost—utterly lost; and the cruellest death would be better than the miserable life which is before me."

"Come, come!" said Jim, "this bean't fighting

like a man. I tell you I've been as down as you, sir, and had the same black thoughts on my mind as you has now; yet I am a happy man, and wouldn't change that old smoky hut in Pemberton Wood for the finest store in Ameriky. You'll pull through, I'll be sworn — you'll pull through, and I'll help you to do it, sir!"

Cecil held out his feverish hand, which Jim clasped between both his own, and shook it rather roughly.

"I thank you, Perks, and shall be glad if you will not leave me until this ague is gone," said Cecil, sadly. "Be kind enough as you go out to see the landlord, and tell him I cannot see Mr. Kidderminster if he calls. That man has humbled me—more than—more than all I have suffered elsewhere."

Promising to comply with Cecil's request, Jim went down-stairs, and calling on Mr. Barker delivered the message.

"What's up?" asked Mr. Barker. "The party ill?"

"Yes. Nothing serious—got a headache," replied Jim. "Is there any respectable woman you knows who could come as nurse like, now and then, when I'm obliged to go out?"

"Respectable woman about here?" said Barker, laughing ironically. "I should say you'd hunt long enough before you'd find one, excepting my missus. Look about the streets as you go along, and then think if any respectable woman could live in such sties. I'd have left long ago, but I'd nothing but this house to live on; I feared to let it, and so here I am, and have grown used to it. Don't trust any one here about your friend if he's got a shilling to lose, for they'd have it."

"Thank you, master," said Jim; "I thought as much when I asked the question. Good day, sir." As Jim opened the door to go into the street, he found a woman about to enter, whose appearance indicated poverty, but at the same time her poor patched shawl and gown were scrupulously clean, and in her face there was a look of earnest truthfulness.

Jim acknowledged her claims to respectability at once, and with the familiarity which exists among persons of his class, laid his hand upon her arm and said :—

“ Do you live here, missus ? ”

“ No, sir,” replied the woman ; “ not in this house. My room is in the next street.”

“ What, that place yonder, where some of the houses are tumbling down ? ” asked Jim. The street to which he referred was almost the worst in that wretched district.

“ Yes, sir,” replied the woman. “ I have taken it to teach some of these poor people to sew and read, to learn how to do many things of which they know nothing, and to bring them this Book —the Message from God. I am what is called a Bible-woman.”

“ Oh ! ” said Jim, “ Oh ! What, you go preaching to em ? ”

“ No — not quite that,” said the old Bible-woman, “ there are missionaries for that work. My duty is to go where missionaries cannot—

they where wouldn't be allowed to enter without receiving violence and bad words; but where they'll listen to me after a time, because I am one of themselves, and they think I am trying to do them good. I show them how to make their rooms cleaner, to make their pence go further, how to mend and make such clothes as they can get, and to keep out of the gin-shop."

"That's the hardest job of all, I should take it," said Jim.

"It is; but I do succeed sometimes. I am going up-stairs to a subscriber."

"A what?"

"A woman who gives me a penny every week until she has bought a Bible like this," said the woman. "She pays her last penny to-day and will have her book, and all those pence would have gone in drink, and so made her home dirtier and her clothes more ragged."

"Stop a minute," said Jim, as the Bible-woman was about to pass on. "You can do something else, I suppose, if you're paid for it?"

"I am paid to employ five hours a day in this work," said the Bible-woman; "after that my time is my own."

"That's it," said Jim. "When shall you have done Bibling?"

"This is my last call. Why do you ask?"

"Because I've a friend up-stairs who is very queer with agy, and I'm obliged to go to Holborn on business. If you'd stay with him whilst I'm gone, and make him a little tea presently, and see to him, I'll pay you accordin' to time—say sixpence a hour—I shan't be above a hour or two I expects."

"Yes," replied the woman calmly, "I'll stay with him."

"Well, that's settled," said Jim; "though I should have fancied you'd a' asked some'ut about your man, seeing what these parts is."

"I am used to visit the worst men and women in Clerkenwell," answered the Bible-woman, "and to see the worst sights, and have no fear for myself. I know whose work I am doing."

"Yes, that's both bold and good of you," said Jim ; "but if my friend don't talk to you, you needn't talk to him. It's quiet he wants just now."

Jim returned up-stairs with the Bible-woman, and whilst she was engaged with her subscriber in the room above, he told Cecil that he had engaged this woman as a sort of nurse until he himself could resume the duty.

"She's a clean, well-spoke person, sir, I assure you, but I fancy she's a good deal given to religious pursuits, so mind what you say, sir," said Jim, by way of caution.

It was nearly half an hour before the Bible-woman came down into Cecil's room, and then Jim repeated his opinion that rest was required more than conversation, having, we fear, some idea that the Bible-woman might consider Cecil as a prospective subscriber, and possibly, in discharge of her duty, become eloquent in behalf of the cause she had so much at heart.

The woman smiled and nodded her head, as

though she quite understood the meaning of her new employer's caution, and was not in the least offended by it.

When Jim introduced her to Cecil, saying "Here she is, sir ; she isn't going to talk, sir," he left the room, promising to return in an hour or two at the furthest.

The Bible-woman proceeded noiselessly to arrange what disorder there was, and then sat down quietly by the bedside, as though she had been long accustomed to such woman's work.

CHAPTER IX.

JIM PERKS PROVES HIMSELF TO BE A VERY ARTFUL FELLOW, AND TAKES ADVANTAGE OF MISS WYCHERLY'S CONFIDENCES TO HIM.

THE business which took James Perks to Holborn was to see Miss Kate Wycherly. Jim had some mysterious relations with that young lady which time perhaps will develop. He therefore found ready access to her, and with less circumlocution than might have been expected from one in his position of life he told her all that we know of his interview with Mr. Cecil, and something more, as he said :—

“ Ah ! miss, I really think it would bring out a spark or two from the stony heart of his bad father to see the fine noble gentleman as I remember Mr. Cecil, lying in that dirty room,—

Old Court hogs has better lodging and cleaner litter to lie on,—to see him lying there shivering with agy or burning with fever, and he not caring whether he lives or dies, miss."

Kate compressed her lips together to constrain an emotion she did not care to exhibit before Perks; but he had a cause to gain, and would not understand the action.

"When I think of Mr. Cecil, miss, as he showed in the huntin'-field, or that day at Old Court when he sledged the ladies about on the ice, I can't believe it's the same gentleman lying in a Clerkenwell lodging-house, beat down worse than ever I was, for I had friends among my own sort who was always glad to see 'un, and make merry night or day as time was when we happened to meet and money was flush or scarce with any one of us; but poor Mr. Cecil hasn't a soul that comes a-nigh him!—not one of all his friends has tried to find out what has comed to him! There he is, he says, 'forsook by all, father and friends—father and friends and relations!'”

Kate still compressed her lips, but nature would have way, and the tears filled her large eyes, now fixed on the rude speaker.

"I excepts you, miss, on course I do ; but then he doesn't know—never has knowed from me—that you have ever heard a word about or cared to hear a word since—you know when, miss. No, he thinks that Mr. Lockyer and his wife, Mrs. Masham—all that he cared for—despises him."

"Despises him !" said Kate.

"Yes, that's the word, miss—that there's not a way for him by which he can earn a honest crust, much less get back to the gentleman he was. O miss ! it's terrible to hear him rave and moan, and say 'I'm a lost man ! No friends ! No hope of work !' And then to hear him almost pray, miss, to die outright—at once, and get out of the way of everybody. And him such a kind noble gentleman, too ! He'd a heart as tender as any woman's, I'm sure. And what he did for me —what he said to cheer me to stick to honest

courses ; and when I got home-sick in Ameriky, and should ha' died pining to come home again, how he said ‘Come, Jim ! come, poor fellow, and I'll give you another chance,’ though it made his bad father mad again’ him for the reason you knows on, miss. And now to think I can't do him a good turn—can't help him—can't find nobody to help him either ! ”

Jim pressed his clenched hand upon his forehead, for despite the art he was using he felt acutely the desperate position of the man who had befriended him.

“ Mr. Hartley must not be left in this neglected condition,” said Kate, rising and pacing the room. “ I have thought of his peculiar position very earnestly, but the difficulties—” She paused.

“ I know, miss, there is great difficulties for you, a young lady, but if Mr. Lockyer hadn't turned his back on him—dare say he has reasons—somebody might a' spoke to Mrs. Masham.”

"Yes," said Kate, earnestly. "Why not go to her, James? I have had her in my mind."

Jim held down his head, and rubbed his hand about his badger-skin cap before he answered.

"You know why, miss, I can't speak to her. I haven't the courage to do it now. Haven't I helped to rob her of her rights?—I can't look her in the face."

"Then I will go to her myself, James," said Kate, colouring as she spoke; "Mrs. Masham will not refuse me anything, I believe, not even this strange request."

"Strange, miss?" asked Jim, rather surprised.]

"You cannot understand my meaning," replied Kate, colouring again; "but I am content to make some sacrifice for one—for Mr. Hartley."

"God bless you, miss!" cried Jim. "You will be doing good work in doing that."

"You say there is a decent woman waiting upon Mr. Hartley, therefore you shall get a cab and go with me to Mrs. Masham. I shall be ready in five minutes."

Jim hastened down the stairs two at a time, and having procured a cab ascended them again with equal agility, and soon afterwards Miss Wycherly and he were on their way to Mrs. Masham.

Painful disappointment! Mrs. Masham had gone out of town for three or four days.

Should Kate go to Ruth?

No; that dear friend was the wife of Frank Lockyer now, and the old confidences must end.

There was nothing to be done it seemed but to return to Holborn, and the cabman by whose side Jim rode wondered what had happened to make his fare suddenly so taciturn.

When the cab stopped Jim opened the door with so much grief and disappointment in his face that Kate felt her own zeal for Cecil almost reproached thereby.

"You are going back to Mr. Hartley," said Kate tenderly, "and will see that he has a doctor—there is his fee in that paper, and you will do—do all you can to comfort him. You

must not—mind—you must not mention that you have seen me, or that we have been to call on Mrs. Masham.”

“Oh, I mustn’t, miss!” replied Jim, looking more darkened.

“The Bible-woman, you say, is a very decent person?” asked Kate.

“Yes, miss.”

“Request her to call upon me when you return; I am anxious to speak with her as soon as possible,” said Kate; and her agitation became so great that she could not say more, but motioned with her hand to Jim to open the door and then to pay the driver, as she hurried upstairs to her father’s chambers.

She had been back about half an hour when Mr. Wycherly returned from a general meeting of shareholders of the company of which he had been a director. He was in great glee, and kissed Kate with a heartiness that proclaimed him in exceeding good humour.

“Well, my dear, I’m home earlier than I ex-

pected, but I'm off again in a quarter of an hour to go down to the works at Stoppingvale, and for the last time."

"How so, papa?" inquired Kate.

"My dear, I was one of the out-going directors, and to-day I was proposed for re-election, and I am happy to say was rejected by a large majority," replied Wycherly cheerfully.

"Re-elected, you mean," said Kate.

"No, my dear," replied Wycherly, patting his daughter's cheek. "No, I was rejected, together with two other equally incompetent men; and so my bothers and journeyings are nearly at an end."

"Are you serious, papa?" asked Kate.

"I am serious, and I am perfectly jolly, for if ever there was a man unsuited for the position of a director I was the man," said Wycherly. "I knew it long ago, but fearing to damage a good property by my retirement, I continued to encounter the badgerings of the board-meetings and the certain condemnation of the shareholders. I

am now free again, my dear, and for the rest of my days will stick by Old Court, unless for a ramble now and then to oblige you. Now a clean shirt and my dressing-case, and off I am for Stoppingvale with our engineer."

This journey was very opportune for the accomplishment of a scheme which Kate had devised, and Mr. Wycherly was packed off with surprising rapidity.

On his way back to Clerkenwell, Jim called upon a respectable practitioner, and having presented the fee which he had received from Kate, prevailed upon the doctor to accompany him at once to visit Cecil.

The patient's ailments proved to be of a mild character, and rest, quiet, and a little medicine were prescribed as remedies.

The Bible-woman had kept her watch patiently and silently almost, during Jim's absence, as Cecil, busied with his own sad thoughts, had not invited conversation, merely thanking her for her kindly ministrations, interesting her greatly by the

gentleness which he displayed, and which was so much at variance with the conduct of those with whom she came in contact usually, in that unholy colony.

Jim having called her to the further end of the room, spoke to her in a few earnest whispers, and having obtained her promise to go at once to Miss Wycherly, gave her some money and despatched her upon her new mission.

When she was gone Cecil called Jim to his bedside and told him how very grateful he was for his disinterested kindness—disinterested indeed, as he must know no reward could come from one so outcast and friendless as the unhappy man who now offered him his thanks.

Jim would not admit that any thanks were due to him, but reminded Cecil of all the good he had done for him formerly, and the comfort which it had brought about him; “and you mustn’t give in so, sir,” added Jim; “I’m certain sure that help ‘ill come when you least thinks for it, and from people you knows nothin’ of now, sir.”

Cecil shook his head and said no more; but Jim's words had brought back to his mind those friends he had loved and lost, until in a waking dream he recalled many happy scenes of his past life, only to make more terrible the dark visions of the future.

The evening was closing in when a gentle tap at the door announced a visitor.

"If that should be the man Kiddy, do not admit him; I will not see him again," said Cecil.

It was not Mr. Kiddy. He had made a long morning at the "Compasses," and under the influence of his "old and only failing" had renewed his acquaintance with the police, and being pot-valiant had assaulted an inspector. As he was no stranger at the police-court, his expiation was decreed to be a week in retirement.

The Bible-woman had returned according to promise, but bringing with her a friend, as poor and faded apparently as herself, to supply her place, and Jim introduced her to Cecil as Mrs.

Martha. He and the Bible-woman then retired to the landing and resumed their earnest whispering.

"I have come, sir," said **Martha** after a time, in a low sweet voice, "to offer such small service as I can do for your comfort."

"Thanks, many thanks," replied **Cecil**, "but I am past all human comfort, and am too evil, I fear, to hope for it elsewhere."

"The greatest offender need not say that, sir," said **Martha** softly, "and human sympathy can do much to lighten suffering. You are depressed by present difficulties——"

"Depressed—I am indeed, almost to despair," replied **Cecil**, something in the voice compelling him to reply.

"Why should you despair?" asked **Martha**.

"Why?" **Cecil** raised himself upon his arm and looked wildly towards his questioner, whose face was partly veiled and turned from what little light there was remaining of the closing day.
"Why should I despair? I am lying here sick—

I hope to death—without one friend except the man who brought you here ; without the skill to labour for my commonest wants, even if any would employ me, come as I have from a convict-prison."

"I cannot, from what I have heard of you," said Martha, "believe that your guilt has been great, and you must have had some who loved you —some whom you loved and trusted."

"I have had all!" replied Cecil, pressing his hand upon his forehead, "and where are they now? My mother, my dear, dear mother, is in her peaceful grave; thank God for that! The friend for whom I would have given my life, left me months ago to the miserable solitude of my prison. I might have wronged him perhaps, and he has now grown wise enough to resent it."

"Well, go on," said Martha. "He was not your only friend."

"Yes," my place in life was singularly confined," said Cecil, sighing heavily.

"No kindred?" asked Martha.

"Yes, in name—only in name," was the reply.

"Your case would be very strange, if what you say be true," said Martha. "I can hardly think it possible that you, or any one like you, could have attached yourself so slightly to the world about you. Was there no one—no one of my sex—" Martha paused as though she feared to offend by speaking on.

"What would you ask?" said Cecil, peevishly, and again resting his head upon his pillow.
"Why do you ask?"

"To find you an outlet back into the world," said Martha, her voice like music.

"I would rather die day by day, and in this filthy place, than seek the help you seem to indicate. The knowledge of my love would be a shame to her—the supposition that she had ever thought me worthy of regard would be shame to her also. No! I can die! I can die! but not wrong the only one I ever loved."

Martha did not seek to break the silence which

succeeded this passionate outbreak until Cecil had asked for some drink.

Having satisfied his want, Martha resumed her seat, and then said :—

“It is very strange how closely one man’s fate may resemble another’s. I knew, in my youth, a kind and worthy gentleman who, under an overwhelming temptation, fell into error. He suffered, as you have done, and when he was released from prison, found that his former friends remembered only his fault and had forgotten his many virtues. For some time he despaired, as you have done, until he recollect ed that there was one who had loved him, although she had been compelled to hide from all, even from him, until it betrayed her in one unguarded moment.”

Cecil again raised himself on his arm and looked at the speaker.

“His hour of sorrow came,” continued Martha, “and they were apart for years; but believing that his fate was undeserved, she locked up her love in her heart as though it were the greatest treasure

of her life, and resolved that, should he never seek it, there it should remain until she died. A time of trial came ; her friendship, love, and self-respect were cruelly insulted, and she was impelled to confess it, as the best defence for her friend and for herself."

"I hardly understand you," said Cecil, looking earnestly towards her ; but the dark was between them.

"I cannot speak more clearly," continued Martha, "and it matters little to my story. The man she had loved became free again, as I have said, and despaired as you do now. If he had loved her as truly as he thought he had done, he could not have doubted what her conduct would have been, believing that she loved him also."

"Did he know that ?" asked Cecil.

"He ought to have done so, remembering what had passed,—that once he had surprised her into words which she could have spoken only to the man she loved. He should have known that she

had forgotten her youth,—had rejected all that a young girl covets,—admiration, pleasures, and companionship ; and having this knowledge, he should have been satisfied that she had not changed towards him, but loved him better for his sorrows.”

“What did he do ?” asked Cecil, almost in a whisper.

“He asked her—not in words, perhaps—but he did ask her to set aside the instinctive reserve of her woman’s nature, and prove her love before he would ask it. He made her hide her blushes in the darkness of the night, to risk much misconstruction, and practise a deceit towards her confiding father, and kneel——”

“Merciful Father ! Is this delirium ?”

The woman had knelt as she was speaking, and then, having taken his hand and pressed it to her lips, she murmured “Cecil !”

“Oh, loved at last ! Loved at last !” he cried, and sank back exhausted on his pillow.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. MASHAM RECEIVES A CONFIDENCE—VISITS COUSIN JERRY, BUT NOT UPON HER OWN ACCOUNT, AND MR. PERKS MAKES A CALL IN SUBURBAN SQUARE.

Cecil's cry brought the Bible-woman and Jim into the room, and the cause of the exclamation was understood at once.

Kate was greatly overcome by the ordeal to which she had subjected herself, that she might rescue the man she loved from despondency—despair—and having accomplished her loving mission, she and Jim departed, leaving the Bible-woman to resume her duty as nurse.

Although Kate had left the room, the unspeakable comfort which she had brought to the sick-hearted Cecil remained with him, and he gave

utterance aloud to his thankfulness for a deliverance from more than the pangs of death. He did not attempt to conjecture how his deliverance was to be effected ; his good angel would care for that ; and he almost wondered how he had permitted such despondency to oppress him. Kate loved him ! Pure, noble, imperious Kate had knelt by his bedside and confessed her love ! Happiness undreamed of ! Why should he fear the future when she had condoned the past ?

Was he not right ?

“Yes, sir. It is our duty to strive to the utmost, and leave the rest to God !” said the Bible-woman, true to her vocation. The sermon of that poor preacher, arrayed in a patched gown, her folded hands marked with the lines of labour, and her homely face made comely by the beauty of her faith, was never forgotten when new trials had to be made and difficulties overcome. It was a short homily, but worthy to be remembered.

When Jim returned and had dismissed the preacher, he had more comfort, more happiness to

impart to the now hopeful Cecil. Jim's lips had been sealed until that night, or he could have told Cecil that Kate's love had been with him in his London prison,—that it was she who had sent him those parting words which had been received so coldly, bowed down as he then was by his great sorrow; that the almost careless answer:—"I have nothing to ask of any one, or for any one, except, perhaps, poor Mr. Garrett," was a solemn charge to her who loved him, and from that day until the present she had been the unknown almoner to Jerry; Jim—proud Jim—being alone trusted with her secret.

This talk kept both awake long into the night, for Cecil would hear it over and over again as though he could not tire of listening; but Jim had been very busy for many preceding hours, and having lost much of the interest in his own narrative, he availed himself of one of Cecil's temporary reveries to pass into the land of dreams, a fact he announced audibly by a succession of sonorous snores. After a time Cecil

slept also, and the morning was somewhat advanced when he awoke to the consciousness that not e'en "love can live" on sweet fancies, and was thankful that his faithful Jim was ready with his breakfast.

Before Kate retired to rest she wrote a letter, quite a long letter, to Mrs. Masham, just shadowing, as it were, the existence of some mystery which she was anxious to confide to her; for though Kate had many family connections, they had lived so far apart that there was not one who appeared to have such claims upon her confidence as Mrs. Masham. At least she said as much in the letter she had written.

The next day and the next Jim brought intelligence of Cecil's progress, and the medical man who had been called in was surprised at his own skill, so rapid had been the advance to convalescence. He knew not what a potent philter had been administered without a consultation with him or any other member of the faculty of medicine. We have faith in old women's re-

medies, and had in those of some young professors also, long years ago.

On the Thursday after Kate's visit to Cecil, Mrs. Masham returned, and sorely puzzled she was to interpret the meaning of the singular note which awaited her. Mrs. Masham knew herself to be quick-witted enough, having had much to exercise her shrewdness, but her good opinion of her own capacity did not permit her "to vie with the Sphynx, and that oracle she considered alone capable of solving the mystery." The Sphynx was a great favourite with Mrs. Masham, and was almost the only acquaintance, certainly the only female acquaintance, she had in Egypt.

To Kate therefore she went, and after much painful hesitation on the part of the proud girl—she who had been thought to keep her heart so out of danger—learned the great secret of Kate's life, and how, casting down all conventional decorums, she had hastened to give hope and peace to Cecil, and now asked Mrs. Masham's aid to accomplish

the full deliverance of the friend whom they both had loved.

The step which Kate had taken was on a course which she had duly traced before she could bring herself, even for the sake of Cecil, to unveil her heart, as it were, and she now appealed to Mrs. Masham for her co-operation. It would bring no other gain to Kate, if successful, than the consciousness of having rescued the man she loved from a hopeless future, as she knew that her father would never approve her union with Cecil, and she had lost no jot of that strong filial affection which had so largely influenced her past life. Unselfish her love had always been, unselfish it was to continue, finding its sweet reward in the happiness it conferred on those two men for whose stay and comfort she appeared to have been specially created.

“I thought you suspected long ago what I have now confessed—my love for Cecil Hartley,” said Kate, “from the time when we were in Paris and learned the terrible misfortune which had

befallen him. Oh, the agony of those days I shall remember until I die! I am sure I could not have concealed from you how greatly I was distressed—how much I must have esteemed”—(Mrs. Masham smiled)—“No, loved him—loved Cecil.”

“I should not have had a woman’s heart or a woman’s eyes had I not discovered your secret, Kate,” said Mrs. Masham; “but I have kept it as closely as though you had confided it to me.”

Kate took both Mrs. Masham’s hands, her face and neck rosy-red, “And now you will help to save him ?

Again and again Mrs. Masham kissed Kate’s blushing cheeks, and confessed how proud she was to have a share in such a noble mission.

Time pressed for action, and on the succeeding day Mrs. Masham opened the campaign.

The years which have passed since last we met with Jeffery Garrett have added many more ink-marks to his flaxen hair and a few additional wrinkles to his face, otherwise he is un-

changed, being one of those hardware personages on whom time and weather, fair or foul, make little impression. His pepper-and-salt suit might have been the same he had worn when first he took to that simple costume, or as though he had been a bird that moulted only to reproduce the same kind of feathers.

The portrait of his faithless love still hung in the place of honour over the fireplace, but it had had a new gilt frame in honour, no doubt, of the visit paid to him by the loved original. The green baize covering of the family Bible had been turned, and looked as verdant.

The little school had prospered, and many of his pupils were distinguishing themselves as industrious apprentices or well-conducted plough-boys and errand-lads. His pence were more regularly paid, and his small annuity made him rich enough to give a fortnight's holiday at Christmas, and rendered him less anxious at harvest time when many of his scholars were required in the field. He might have been called "Happy Jerry," but

for the one abiding wound which, as the poet says, "no herbs can cure." His fishing-rod found him occasionally limited amusement, and he generally passed a portion of each evening over a pipe and a glass of ale at the little public-house where Frank Lockyer had been admitted to his confidence.

One day—the succeeding day to Kate's interview with Mrs. Masham—just as his morning scholastic duties were over, he was surprised to receive a note, soliciting his presence at the inn, and written by the hand which he had once thought his own.

The sight of the well-remembered characters set his old faithful heart twittering as it had done years before, and he continued to look at the letter long after he had possessed himself of its contents. It merely said "Dear cousin Jeffery, Come as soon as convenient to yours sincerely, Hester Masham;" but his foolish brain was covering the little page with other well-remembered words, and it was some minutes

before he could rub his moistened eyes and read the simple request in its true meaning.

“ Ah ! why has love a memory,
When all its hopes are fled :
A voice that ever seems to be
Mourning the dead ! ”

muttered Jerry, quoting a quatrain of his own composition, and which he had sent once on a time for the Poet’s Corner of the county paper, if the hope that Hester Masham, *née* Mereweather, might read them and feel reproached by the cruelty which had evoked them.

With pardonable vanity, he put on his Sunday suit, and changed his somewhat faded linen and cravat, before he proceeded to call upon Mrs. Masham.

Could Jerry have peeped into the room where that lady was awaiting his arrival he would have seen a pensive look on her buxom face and heard perhaps a tender sigh, almost too tender to have escaped from a matron’s bosom, had she not been a widow.

The meeting of the old lovers would have been rather embarrassing but that Mrs. Masham dashed at Jerry with the heartiest recognition, saying—

“ Ah ! cousin Jerry, I am delighted to see you. I need not ask you if you are well, as I never—no, never—saw you looking better ! ”

Jerry assumed his old Emporium manner and bowed several times, but the words he wanted to utter, for some reason or other, stuck fast in his throat, as though the core of Adam’s apple were really no fiction.

Mrs. Masham affected not to see his confusion, and went on at score.

“ I have come down to see you on very particular business, and I have ordered dinner, hoping you will dine with me,—I know this is a half-holiday. Is it not, now ? ”

“ It is—of course it is; and I am much obliged to you for remembering it—and asking me to dinner,” replied Jerry, dropping his hat.

Mr. Garrett’s awkwardness was excusable, as he

was rarely in ladies' society, and men of retired habits are seldom on terms with the minor graces.

The arrival of the little repast and its subsequent consumption furnished subjects for conversation for the time, and when the meal was over Mrs. Masham, more flushed than she ought to have been by the small quantity of wine and water which she had sipped, said rather abruptly :

“ Now to the business which brought me here, cousin Jerry. The communication which I have to make is of such a delicate nature that I should have hesitated to have conveyed it to any one in whom I have less confidence than I have in you, of whose generous nature I have such a long and grateful recollection. Please don't rise, but let me go on.”

As Jerry was not allowed to bow, he blew his nose with much emphasis, and then assumed an attitude of profound attention.

“ It has occurred to me and to a very dear friend of mine,” continued Mrs. Masham, “ that

you must be very tired of the drudgery of your school."

"Not in the least ; I like it," said Jerry.

Mrs. Masham was rather confused by this unexpected rejection of her peroration, and was obliged to take new ground.

"Very well then — perhaps so. I feel some difficulty, cousin Jerry, in expressing what I would say without giving you pain."

"You give me pain, cousin Hester ? No, that is all over." Of what was Jerry thinking ?

"I will try not to do so," said Mrs. Masham, flushing again. "Some years ago, I forgot exactly how many, I told you that a person who considered himself Mr. Selwyn's debtor had resolved to pay us in part the money he considered our due."

"Yes, Hester ; and very grateful I am for the honourable way in which he has sent me my annuity, as I may call it,—at one time by your hands, but during the last five years by some unknown agent," replied Jerry.

"Yes, so I heard," said Mrs. Masham. "I always concealed his name from you because he wished me to do so, but it is now necessary that I should inform you of our generous debtor. It is Cecil Hartley."

"Cecil Hartley? Jacob Hartley, you mean," replied Jerry, surprised.

"Jacob Hartley is a bad wicked man, and has never repented of the wrong he did to you and others, but his fine noble son, suspecting that we had been robbed of Mr. Selwyn's money by some trickery of his bad father, took the only means in his power of making restitution."

"Dear me!" said Jerry. "If I remember rightly I saw Cecil Hartley once. He was afterwards convicted of forgery and transported, was he not?"

"He was; but his crime was committed under very peculiar circumstances, and for which I and others can find great excuse," replied Mrs. Masham.

"But he has always remitted me my money... how was that?" asked Jerry.

"When Cecil was in prison he was asked by a most faithful friend if he had any desire that could be gratified. He answered none; but one great regret pressed upon him, and that was the loss you would sustain. That friend has supplied his place."

"How very generous! Too generous! And it must now cease—positively cease," said Jerry.

Mrs. Masham's eyes sparkled as she replied:

"You are not changed, I see, cousin Jerry; no care for yourself. But I have not finished. Cecil Hartley has returned from his punishment and finds his father's heart as closed to him as it was years ago, and when a few paltry pounds would have saved his son from shame and ruin."

She then told Jerry all the incidents of Cecil's fall and his cruel abandonment by his father, and was not surprised or offended at one or two emphatic commentaries made by Jerry during her narration.

"Cecil has now returned and finds himself shut

out from every honourable employment. He was until three days ago almost despairing, and would have perished perhaps but for the one self-sacrificing friend who has cared for you."

"And that was you, Hester!" said Jerry.

"No, cousin, you owe me nothing but—I fear—some hours of sorrow, which I know you have forgiven."

Jerry could not be restrained from seizing her hand and kissing it.

"It was one," continued Mrs. Masham, "who loves Cecil Hartley very dearly; loved him through all his degradation, and is now his only hope of rescue."

"It's a woman!" cried Jerry. "It must be a woman, by the way you speak."

"It is, and one the least suspected of such devoted tenderness. She now appeals by me to you, to help her in this extremity."

"To me?" asked Jerry. "What can I do?"

"Sell your little school," replied Mrs. Masham. "You can by so doing retain with honour your



small annuity, and something more—you can save this poor Cecil, who will thus get back into the world of honourable industry, and by some suitable employment find the means to live. He'll live poorly, perhaps—as you have done—and he will be respected, as you have been."

Poor Jerry covered his face with both his hands and said, " You are too good, Hester ; you are too good."

" You now understand why I am here," continued Mrs. Masham. " The thought was not mine, and under less pressing circumstances I should have declined to have made such a proposal to you ; but Jeffery, I remembered old times ; I remembered how good, forgiving, and self-sacrificing you were, and I believed that you would not hesitate to give up what must be a habit, perhaps a necessity, of your life, to help in his hour of need the unhappy man whose one great error has met such a dreadful punishment."

" You have only done me justice, Hester, in

supposing I could not be ungrateful," said Jerry, "although I do not deserve all the kind things you say of me. When do you wish that I should leave here?"

"That will not be necessary unless you desire to do so," replied Mrs. Masham. "You need not quit the old school-house, and I trust the companionship of Cecil will make it even a pleasanter home than ever."

"True, very true," said Jerry; "I can help in the school and keep the boys together. When am I to expect Mr. Hartley?"

"You are not to expect Mr. Hartley at all," replied Mrs. Masham smiling. "You will receive Mr. Charles Harrison; the change of name is necessary for many reasons."

"Quite so; his own might be remembered by many about here, and to his disadvantage. Cousin Hester," continued Jerry after a pause, "you cannot think how happy you have made me by this request: you have made me feel that I can now be of some use in the world."

"Surely you have never thought otherwise, dear friend?" said Mrs. Masham, holding out her hand, which Jerry took in both of his, nor did she attempt to withdraw it for some time. "You have been the means of helping many a good lad to his future success in life, and enabling more to learn their duty to God and man."

"You are very kind to inspire such a hope," replied Jerry, "and that I have been able to do so is due greatly to the generosity of Mr. Harrison, and I rejoice to be in a position to show my gratitude."

So the first step towards Cecil's restoration to a life of honourable usefulness was accomplished, and shortly afterwards Jerry had the painful pleasure of conducting his old love to the station, and then to see her depart, her "nods and becks, and wreathed smiles" setting his old faithful heart palpitating violently.

The next morning Mrs. Masham went early to Kate's lodgings, and reported the success of her mission. Her communication was received with

great thankfulness. Shortly afterwards Jim Perks arrived, and when he was told what had been done for Cecil's good, the poor fellow was so delighted that he couldn't keep silence.

"I told 'un how it would be when Miss Kate took 'un in hand. I knowed she'd never rest till she'd set 'un on his legs again. Bless you, miss, bless you for all you 'a done for me and for him—and he desarves it, though I didn't."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Masham, who saw that Kate was somewhat abashed at Jim's reference to the noble boldness which she had displayed for Cecil's rescue. "Time will prove whether you both deserved the kindness which Miss Wycherly has shown you; so wait for me in the next room, and be ready to accompany me to Mr. Hartley."

Jim obeyed orders instantly, and then Kate said to Mrs. Masham :

"You must be very careful—very earnest in communicating with *him*, or he may object to

accept this arrangement if he thinks that Mr. Garrett is to be my annuitant."

"I will be careful," replied Mrs. Masham. "There will be no necessity to tell Cecil the terms of the contract, and Cousin Jerry will not be less considerate."

"You must tell Cecil also," said Kate with a trembling voice, "that though I wish him to remember what has passed between us, and to believe that all I said was true, he must not ask—he must not hope—to see me or to have any correspondence with me. Not all my father's love for me, were I to confess the whole truth, would make him forgetful of the past, and to continue to deceive him would be impossible for me, even if Cecil were to ask it. I do not believe that he would make such a request. He will, I am sure he will, understand and excuse the desperate, the unmaidenly step I have already taken." Kate covered her face and paused.

"You have done perfectly right, my dear child,"

said Mrs. Masham ; "acted like the noble girl you ever were, and according to a true woman's instincts. You act rightly now in deciding to proceed no further, although I can imagine the pain you suffer."

" You will tell him this very kindly ; you will not let him imagine that I repent of what I have done, or that—or that I would hesitate to own my love for him before all the world, if my father could be brought to approve ; but that cannot be —must not be even attempted."

Mrs. Masham was of the same opinion, and therefore she remained silent.

" I have known how long and constantly he has loved me," said Kate ; "known it from what Ruth has told me—from Cecil's letters which have been shown me. He has my assurance now, of my love for him. In silence, through shame and sorrow, our love has been preserved to each other, and though we must forego the happiness of communion, so precious to those who love, we shall now have increased faith in each other, and prize

beyond all else the secret treasure hidden in our hearts. Tell him this."

Mrs. Masham promised to be a most considerate messenger, and would go to Cecil at once.

"Stay one moment," said Kate, blushing very much, and placing her hand on her bosom. "It would be a pleasant comfort to me—girls you know have silly fancies—if I thought that he would be reminded now and then of what you will tell him presently."

She took from her bosom a small locket to which a ribbon was attached. "This is my *gage d'amour*—give it to him—to my dear Cecil." Kate then placed her arms round Mrs. Masham's neck and kissed her lips.

"And that also? I understand," said the wily ambassadress.

Kate was very thankful for the womanly interpretation, and smiled her thanks, her large eyes filled with tears of love.

Mrs. Masham thought well over her delicate mission on her way to Cecil's lodging, and by the

time she had arrived there she was prepared with an oration which did great credit to her diplomacy if not to her veracity, and

“She lied like truth.”

Mrs. Masham told Cecil that suspecting Mr. Garrett to be tired of school keeping, now that he had come into possession of a small competency, she had gone down and found him perfectly willing to retire in favour of Cecil, henceforth to be known as Mr. Charles Harrison. Jerry's only stipulation on resigning his scholastic chair was that he should be permitted to reside with Mr. Harrison, and to take a small share of the school duties by way of recreation. The *suppressio veri* in this statement was very limited, and we all know that under certain circumstances silence is golden.

Cecil most gratefully accepted this arrangement for his future, and Mrs. Masham unflinchingly received all his expressions of gratitude on her own account, as she considered it prudent not to

mention Kate's name in connection with the transaction. Besides, she knew what love and blessings were in store for Kate when her message, word for word, should have been repeated, as it was, to the most happy Cecil, and whose full heart had scarcely room for the accession of more joy when Aunt Hester gave him the *gage d'amour* and the kiss also, the latter rather intensified by her own affection for the giver and receiver.

The next day a little sunshine struggled into the narrow street, and shone upon the grimed and wondering faces of the crowd around Mr. Barker's door, attracted thither by the unusual spectacle of a street cab, necessary for Cecil's removal, as he was too weak to walk.

"Goin' to the 'ospitle?" said one.

"P'raps he's got friends," said another, as though such connections were a rarity in that quarter, "an's goin' in the country."

"Wishes he may get it," said a third. "Looks more like a croaker goin' to the dead 'us."

"Stand à drop of summut, master?" said an old crone, as the cab drove away; and so happy was Jim Perks that he threw a sixpence out of the window, and occasioned a scramble which terminated in much bad language and a fight between two viragoes, who might have been women, had any in the great city round about cared for their "immortal part" and taught them to lead decent lives, to speak womanly words, nor have left them to utter holy names only as blasphemings,—to live and die worse than the beasts which perish, fulfilling only the conditions of their savage nature. The Bible-woman has opened the door of some of the horrid dens where these human creatures hide their inconceivable miseries, and the tales which she has told and still is telling must be listened to sooner or later.*

The fresher air even of Holborn was grateful to the poor convalescent; and when the train carried

* See *The Missing Link*, by L. N. R.

Cecil and his humble friend and faithful servant into the sight of green fields and autumn-tinted trees, the invalid seemed to gather renewed strength with every breath which he inhaled.

It had been arranged that they should stop two stations short of Hilltown, where Cecil and Jim might perchance have been recognised (although time had changed Cecil very much), and it was not until two days later that Jerry Garrett welcomed his successor at his little school-house.

Jerry had been much perplexed how to receive Mr. Harrison, but his kind nature soon prompted him to the course he should pursue.

He ushered Cecil into the parlour with many expressions of welcome, and with a manner which conveyed something of deference as well as cordiality. When Cecil was seated, Jerry closed the door, shutting out Jim in the school-room, and then taking Cecil's hand, he addressed him in a neat speech; which he had prepared with much care.

"My good young friend, I cannot say how happy

I am in being able to repay some of your former kindness to me. I know all your misfortunes and much of your goodness, and if you will accept me as one of your devoted friends, I am sure you shall never have cause to regret your confidence."

Cecil could only thank him and press his hand warmly.

Gradually, and without any formal announcement to his pupils or their parents, Jerry inducted his successor into his new duties ; and when the school hours were over, the two pedagogues would ramble forth to the brook-side, or work in the school-house garden, which Jerry had usually kept trim enough.

For the sake of appearance and good neighbourhood, the village inn was visited occasionally by both the schoolmasters, but less frequently than of old. Perhaps a game at chess, or draughts, or humbler cribbage, whiled away pleasantly the evening hours. At other times they would sit by their own ingle and talk learnedly of the gentle craft, with its many wiles to catch innocent fish ;

and of state craft sometimes, as fishy and as tricky as the other.

Thus employed, let us leave them for the present, and record an adventure which James Perks undertook on his own account, and of which, as he confessed afterwards, "he said nothin' to nobody."

When Cecil had found his true friends, and they had discovered for him a way out of the dark present, Jim could not control a desire he had to call on Mr. Selwyn Hartley, and, if he could gain nothing else by his visit, have the satisfaction of telling the cruel man that his outcast son had found friends indeed, and was now sure to be prosperous and happy.

With this intention, he one evening, when the Bible-woman was nurse, presented himself at Mr. Hartley's house in Suburban Square. The knocker was invalidated, being padded with an old glove, but as Jim had long since come down to the servants' bell, he scarcely noticed the intimation that illness was in the house. Having rung

the bell, he buttoned his coat, as though to brace up his courage, for he expected a stormy reception from Mr. Hartley.

In due time the door was opened by Sally Stirkins, who had been reinstated in her old situation, as not one of her successors (and they had been many) would submit to the rules of the house or the temper of the master. Sally loved Miss Clara, and perhaps the old house also.

"Mr. Hartley at home?" asked Jim, sharply.

"Well, he isn't out," replied Sarah; "but he's got bad eyes, and won't see nobody unless on very particular business."

"Then he'll see me perhaps," said Jim.
"Please tell him that Mr. Perks wants to speak to him."

"Mr. Perks!" cried Sally, holding her candle to his face. "Well, if I didn't think I knowed your voice agin! Why, it's how many year since you called last? I remember we had a roast line of pork and——"

"Who's that you're talking to there?" shouted Mr. Hartley from the parlour. "Why the devil don't you shut the door?"

"My goodness!" said Sally, making her way down the passage, "I shall ketch it; and Miss Clara upstairs with a sick headache, and me obliged to nuss him."

Jim heard his name announced and was hardly prepared for its stormy reception.

"Sure-ly you'll see me, Mr. Hartley," bawled Jim from the passage. "It's only me as was such a friend years back!"

There was a volley of very naughty words, a rattling of fire-irons, a sound of broken glass, and the sudden reappearance of Sally Stirkins.

"I've comded to tell you Mr. Cecil's well, and likely to do well," Jim bawled again.

"Call a policeman, you old faggot," shouted Hartley. "Give the fellow in charge! What does he mean by coming to my house?"

"Here, you go along, Mr. Perks," said Sally, opening the door. "I never saw him in such a

rage but once afore, and that was when we'd a biled knuckle of veal. You go along please ; for he's a volcano."

"Then it's no use my tryin' to see him ?" said Jim, pausing in the doorway.

Mr. Hartley in the parlour resumed his ejaculations, and the visitor and Sally decided that the attempt would fail.

"He's gone, sir," screamed Sally, half closing the door, adding, "I say, when will you call here again ? I wants to see you—that is, Miss Clara does, who's just had beef-tea and——"

"I don't think I shall call here again for some time to come," said Jim, laughing.

"Oh ! but please do. Miss Clara has something to give you which——"

"Would miss like to see her brother ?" asked Jim earnestly.

"Oh wouldn't she," said Sally ; "but she ain't allowed to leave the house, not even to go to church on Sundays. No nigger driver——"

But the volcano again breaking out into erup-

tion, Sally closed the door and left Jim laughing in the street.

"I wonder what wages he gives that old party not to pison 'un," muttered Jem, as he walked towards Clerkenwell. "Tho' on second thoughts, he's such a wicked 'un I don't think even ars'nic 'ud touch 'im."

Jim did not renew his visit to Suburban Square for some considerable time. When he did so the result was so perfectly satisfactory to himself and others, that he vowed never to call on Mr. Hartley again.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS WYCHERLY CONFIDES JIM'S SECRET TO HER FATHER—CECIL VISITS HIS FATHER FOR THE LAST TIME.

SOME months had passed since the occurrence of the events recorded in the preceding chapter. The Wycherlys had returned to Old Court, and its worthy proprietor, busied no longer with Board meetings and money-making projects, had resumed in part his former mode of life, and was happier for the change. He knew not through what stormy trials his beloved child had passed since she had quitted the home of her happy childhood, and being older himself and less disposed to those amusements which had formerly interested him, he

failed to notice how grave she had become, and how indifferent she was to other society than his own.

There was always a quiet cheerfulness in Kate's manner when he was present, and when alone with her own thoughts she had schooled herself to a patient resignation.

Again and again Kate had reasoned over the course which she ought to pursue in connection with the revelation made to her by Perks, but her judgment, she felt, was never impartial, and she feared that to confide to her father what she had learned might be to prejudice him still more against Cecil, whose future was all-in-all to her. She could not rest contented, however, with this secret unrevealed to her father, who could alone procure the restitution so long delayed ; and at last she resolved to make the disclosure, believing that what was right could not harm Cecil eventually.

The day Kate selected for this purpose was the anniversary of her mother's death ; a day that was

always remembered by her father with sorrowful tenderness, and when he was least likely to display strong resentment for old wrongs and past offences.

"I have long wanted, papa," she said, "to speak to you upon a matter which I know is always distasteful to you, and concerning the actors in it you are sometimes apt to judge harshly, so far as one is concerned, James Perks."

"I thought I had done with him and satisfied you, Kate, by trusting him about the place," replied Wycherly. "What does he want? or what do you want now?"

"I want to make you acquainted with something of importance which he has told me, and given me full permission to name to you. I wish to take your counsel, but as it refers to what took place long ago, and is no new matter of offence, you must promise me not to let it operate to the man's disadvantage," said Kate earnestly.

"Well, it shan't, if you think it ought not," replied Wycherly.

"I do not, or I should not have exacted a promise from you."

Kate then told her father what she had learned from Jim, and was rather surprised to find that her communication was received (for papa) calmly enough.

"I have always suspected some such roguery, and at one time I should have thought Jim Perks as big a scoundrel as the other fellow," said Mr. Wycherly; "but since I have been in the money-making line and seen how 'men of honour' and wealthy 'gentlemen' can shut their eyes to dirty dealings which bring gain to themselves, I am more charitable to such poor devils as Jim Perks, who never owned a five-pound note in his life."

"You're a very good papa to say so," replied Kate; "and now, what should be done in the matter?"

"I am afraid nothing," said Mr. Wycherly. Mr.

Hartley's the rogue in possession. Mr. Perks was a *particeps criminis*, and I fancy his unsupported evidence would go for nothing. However we can but try. Send some one to Perks, and tell him to be here as soon as he can leave his work."

A messenger was forthwith despatched to Jim, and when he arrived Kate sent for him into the library and told him what had taken place. Jim was greatly relieved by Kate's assurance that Mr. Wycherly himself had found some palliation for his yielding to temptation.

"Well, Master Perks," said Mr. Wycherly, when Kate's *protégé* entered the dining-room, "you seem to have been a party to a pretty disgraceful job, and I'm very glad you have lived to be ashamed of it. Fill yourself a glass of wine, and then sit down."

Jim made one of his best bows, filled a glass, drank it off to the good health of miss and master, and sat down in the seat of the big window, having nothing to say for himself.

"Miss Wycherly has told me all the story," said

Wycherly, "and a pretty tale of rascality it is. I am afraid it is too late to do any good. However you shall go to that scoundrel Hartley. You know where he lives, I believe."

"Yes, sir," replied Jim; "I did go a few months back, but he threatened to give me in charge to the police, and wouldn't let me come a nigh 'un."

Jim then recounted the particulars of his visit to Suburban Square, and the reception he had met with greatly amused Mr. Wycherly.

"The old adage holds good—When rogues fall out, honest men sometimes come by their own," said Mr. Wycherly. "I don't see anything to be done at present, but I'll think over the matter. Go down in the kitchen and get something, and if I don't send for you in half an hour you can go home."

When Jim had retired, Mr. Wycherly threw his napkin over his head and proceeded to think, but the process of cogitation, after dinner, has a soothing effect upon some people, and Mr.

Wycherly soon gave audible indications that he was asleep.

Kate had been thinking also, but not with the same result, and as Jim's half hour's probation was nearly over, she went to the library and requested him to be sent to her.

"The woman you saw," said Kate, "wished you to call again, telling you she had something to say or something to give you?"

"Yes, miss," replied Jim, "but I took no notice of what she said, and she needn't have thought on't agin if it hadn't been for comin' here!"

"She also said something about a Miss Clara,—*his* sister." Jim nodded. "You must go then, James, and see that woman. You can do so without asking to see her master."

Yes, Jim was certain of doing that; and therefore, much to the surprise of Mrs. Perks, he started again for London, and towards the evening made his way to Suburban Square.

There is evidently a kind of freemasonry

among servants, for by signs or sounds they can communicate with each other, however deep the area or lofty the attic may be. In a very short time Jim succeeded in bringing Sally Stirkins up the area steps, although the gate was locked and the key kept in the sideboard, so careful was Mr. Hartley to exclude those pests of London kitchens known by the generic name of "followers."

"Lor, Mr. Perks," said Sally, "I thought you was never goin' to come any more, and I think I should have gone that wild if you hadn't, for stay here I can't and won't. It's outrageous!"

"Well, what can I do, now I am come?" asked Jim.

"You know where to find Master Cecil, I suppose, by what you had the boldness to say last time you was here?" said Sally.

"Yes, I can find him, I've no doubt," replied Jim.

"I'd give a golden sovereign to see him agin, and so would Miss Clara," said Sally. "The last

time he was in this house we had a small hand of pork——”

“ Well, that’s a long time ago,” interrupted Jim. “ What do you want now ? ”

“ I seed it was you at once,” replied Sally, “ and so I runs to Miss Clara and gets from her this package, which my poor missus gave to me the day before she died, when we had—no, we’d nothin’ for dinner.”

Jim took a small packet from her, and then inquired what he was to do with it ?

“ It’s from his poor mother to Master Cecil, her son, and knowing that you knows where he is to be found——” but Sally’s harangue was shortened by the violent ringing of the parlour bell.

“ Oloromussy ! ” said Sally, in a whimper, descending the steps, and motioning Jim to go ; “ he’s a heard me talking to you, and won’t there be a going on. His hearing’s got so quick of late he can hear me go about in list slippers,” and Sally fairly glided to the bottom at the sound of another peal.

Jim stopped under the first lamp, and with difficulty made out the superscription to "My dear son, Cecil," and then carefully replacing the packet in his pocket, caught the last train to Hilltown, arriving there in the middle of the night.

Before Mr. Wycherly was stirring, Jim was at Old Court, and having previously composed one of his remarkable epistles stating what he had obtained, he requested to know Miss Wycherly's will and pleasure concerning it.

Kate, after she had read Jim's note, tore it into a hundred fragments, and then wrote on one of her cards, "*Take it at once to him.*"

Jim did not stop for the customary glass of ale in the kitchen, fearing to be asked questions, but set off to Cecil, some fifteen miles, with an undefined belief that he was carrying tidings of comfort and joy.

There was neither comfort nor joy in that faded packet, and the sight of his mother's writing and the words she had written moved Cecil to tears. He was alone, and it was well that no one

1. The first time I saw you was at a
party in New York City. You were
dressed in a very revealing outfit,
and I was immediately attracted to you.
I asked you for your number, and we
have been together ever since.

2. I have never been in love before,
but I feel like I am with you. You
make me feel safe and secure, and
I know that I can always depend on you.

3. You are the most beautiful woman
I have ever seen. Your smile lights
up my world, and I feel like I am
lucky to have you in my life.

4. I have never been more happy than
when I am with you. You bring out
the best in me, and I feel like I am
the luckiest man in the world.

5. You are the love of my life. I
will never let you go, and I will
always be there for you, no matter
what happens.

looked upon him when he had broken the seal of his mother's legacy, for what he read drove the blood from his face. He clasped his hand upon his forehead as though striving to control the throbbing of his oppressed brain. It was long before he could recover himself sufficiently to look again at the paper which his mother, almost at her dying hour, had enclosed to him, her "dear son, Cecil." What he had read was not only the solution of a mystery, but the unquestionable assurance of what his mother's life had been. With that knowledge, added to other evidence of his father's wickedness, Cecil vowed to compel atonement—so far as it could be obtained—to the living. What new sorrow had come, and would not let Cecil rest until, exhausted by his sufferings, he sank into a stupor which was not sleep?

Jerry Garrett was startled when they met in the morning to see his friend so greatly excited, and to hear from him that he must go to London—to see his wicked father.

Regardless of the chance of recognition Cecil made his way to Hilltown by daybreak, and was in due time in London. Suburban Square was not more than two miles from the London station, but Cecil thought the way interminable, so anxious was he to see his father before he left for the City, and the hour of breakfast was nearly past.

When Cecil arrived at his father's house, he knocked, and walked into the passage as soon as the door was opened, saying as he passed the astonished Sally, "Mr. Hartley has not gone out yet, I suppose?"

Before the servant could reply, Cecil had opened the parlour door and stood once more looking upon his father and his sister.

"Who's that?" asked Hartley.

But what Cecil saw before him kept him dumb. Nature pleaded for a few moments, only a few moments. Then her claims were disallowed.

What did Cecil see?

A grey-headed and grey-bearded man with sunken eyes glaring in their blindness towards

the spot whence sound had reached him. Terror and wonder were mingled in his face, giving place after a while to savage anger. That was Selwyn Hartley, his stony-hearted father!

Blind ! helplessly blind ; and the trembling girl who was ministering to the blind man's wants was his sister Clara, now grown almost to womanhood. To some of her father's wants only could Clara minister, for he had many, and at times the knowledge of them drove him nearly mad.

Selwyn Hartley had large warehouses stored with valuable goods, and which required watchful eyes to keep account of and to turn them to profit.

He had bills and bonds and ready cash to reckon, transfer, and put out at usance ; and he wanted eyes to see that the date was right and the securities sufficient.

He had partners in his trading, cunning, clever bargainers and cypherers ; he had praised their sharpness in bygone times, and encouraged them to trick the simple and to cozen the needy, and

now he was at their mercy. He knew that they considered unscrupulousness as tact, cheating as "getting the best of the bargain," robbery within touch of the law as "taking care of themselves." He had taught them such phrases and their meaning, and he knew—how well he knew it!—that a dishonest master never had apter scholars than Bosbury and Jones. He wanted eyes to see who was now their victim. He knew—how well he knew it!—that they would not spare him, now that he was blind and could not check and countercheck their daily doings! No, they would league together, swear faith to each other like brigands in a play, and he should be their victim, and his wretched gains would be their plunder.

Selwyn Hartley wanted eyes that he might see the present which was about him, whereas he sat shut out from all the living world, seeing with his mental eyes the past, its shifts and cheats and miserable selfishness. True, he had Clara by his side, he would not let her leave him, making her keep constant watch, unless he slept, and then

she would steal away unknown to him. What wonder that Clara had her mother's pale and care-worn face, although so young.

And then when Hartley reckoned up his wrongs, how fierce he grew ! Blindness should be gentle, and mostly is so, being powerless. It was a shocking sight to see that sightless man stamp and tear his unreverend white locks, and clench his hands to strike the air. It was grievous to hear the angry bursts come from his lips in blaspheming words, invoking at the same time his own destruction.

"If I had had fair play I shouldn't have cared, blind or no blind," he had said at breakfast, "but I haven't. I was deceived by your mother, though I worked for her like a horse. I was bullied and deserted by your brother, who, if he had done his duty as a son would now be here to take my place and see that I was not robbed through thick and thin by scoundrels whose fortunes I have made."

Strange ! he had scarcely finished speaking when that son stood before him and he had asked

"Who's that?" The inquiry was repeated with an oath before Cecil could reply.

"I call myself Harrison——"

"Harrison! Harrison! I know no Harrison. Who are you? What are you?" asked Hartley, rapidly.

"I was—once your son," said Cecil.

Clara gave a slight scream, ran to her brother and clasped him round the neck.

Hartley had risen up from his seat, and stood with his sightless eyes turned towards Cecil.

"My son? My son, Cecil? What brings you here?"

"I will tell you when my sister has left the room," said Cecil.

"She shan't go! She shan't stir! Stay here, girl!" cried Hartley.

"She is gone," said Cecil, as he had led the almost fainting girl from the room and left her to the care of the old servant, who had remained listening in the passage.

"You have not come here—for any bad pur-

pose, I hope?" said Hartley, sinking on his chair.

"No," answered Cecil, curtly.

"Well, what have you come for? Money? Assistance? What?" asked Hartley, more subdued than Cecil had imagined he could have been after his first outbreak.

"I am afraid I shall have to occupy more of your time than is required to answer your questions by yes or no. Are you prepared to listen to me?" asked Cecil.

"Of course I must listen. I can't turn you out of the room, even if I wanted to do it. You see what's come to me. Here I am, blind as a mole! Quite blind, and not a soul that I can trust to do my business."

"I see you are blind," replied Cecil with a sigh.

"And a pretty state of mind I am in through it," said Hartley; "everything left at the mercy of my partners, and our stock and book-debts are worth 20,000*l.* at least—at least—leave alone my

private property, worth as much more—and I blind, and you a returned convict that I can't own."

"And who could have saved me from that terrible stigma?" asked Cecil.

"Why yourself, to be sure," replied Hartley adding, with an oath, "Well, that's cool! You go and commit a forgery, and then come to me to help you out of it."

"Who had set me the example. If I could have known the truth of your life?" said Cecil. "I do not claim such an excuse, but how dare you taunt me with my crime? I deserved to suffer, though I had no intention to wrong any man. What can you say, who did plot and carry out your dishonest scheme, taking by it what was the due of Masham, and Garrett, and—"

"You lie!" cried Hartley. "You are an abandoned liar!"

"The witness I hold in my hand cannot lie" (he had taken the packet—his mother's legacy—

from his pocket), "although it is written by your hand and is signed with your name, and bears a date long past."

"What do you mean, sir?" said Hartley, trembling violently. "What's signed by me? Where did you get it?"

"It was a legacy from my beloved mother," replied Cecil. "It was sent to me by her the day before she died, and with one brief line written inside the envelope: 'Let his sin find him out.'"

"Oh! yes; I know she was always preaching that about the house for months," said Hartley; "but read what you want me to hear."

"Perhaps you will remember without giving me that painful trouble," replied Cecil, "when I tell you that it is a copy of the instructions you received from Mr. Selwyn for the disposition of his property——"

"She stole it! she stole it!" cried Hartley, quite off his guard. "I missed it years ago, and thought I had destroyed it. She must

have kept that by her for years, the hypocrite!"

"These instructions you had had carried out in the will you read to Mr. Selwyn. You then substituted another document for his signature, and under it took all that was to have been yours and much that belonged to others."

Hartley appeared to crouch down lower and lower in his chair as Cecil spoke, and then in a voice almost inaudible, he muttered,—"It is false, sir."

"It is the disgraceful truth, and I will prove it if you force me to such a course, and justice be not done by you," replied Cecil, firmly.

"I am old, blind, helpless. How can I fight you?" said Hartley. "What is it you want? How much do you want? I suppose that's what you mean?"

"Yes; and the sum I require is the amount of what you have defrauded your cousins, with legal interest to this time," replied Cecil.

"And have you the impudence to ask that of your poor blind father?" said Hartley.

"I have a regard for truth and justice and for your immortal welfare, and I will compel you to do right to those you have wronged," said Cecil.

"Or you'll expose me?—me, your own father?" asked Hartley.

"Yes!" replied Cecil, emphatically. "Do you remember a father sacrificing his own son, sir? Do you understand now what I require?"

"Yes; plain enough," said Hartley in a thick voice. "You make this demand upon me, and if I pay it no doubt you'll get your commission. Now hear me, Cecil. You have been a fool more than once in your life, and have paid for it. You have learned the value of money by this time, I've no doubt. Give me that paper and I'll pay you two thousand pounds, which will be more than you'll get by exposing me, or by all your truth and justice, and that rubbish."

"Is that your answer?" said Cecil. "If so, the consequences be on your own head."

"Are you really serious?" asked Hartley.
"Will you be such a fool as to——"

"Have justice done in this matter? Yes."

Hartley by slow degrees became convinced that Cecil was not to be bought or turned aside from his settled purpose—he was certain that exposure or worse would follow did he not comply with Cecil's demand. And at last, haggling at every step, he gave the promise Cecil required.

With much compunction of selfishness, in the course of a few weeks, Hartley transferred to Mrs. Masham and Mr. Garrett as many pounds as Cecil considered they were entitled to receive, and thereby astonishing both those worthy people very much indeed; but at Cecil's request they made no inquiries how restitution had been obtained.

When Mr. Hartley had performed the necessary "act and deed" which made him disgorge his ill-gotten money, he said to himself :

"Well, I'm glad that's off my mind. At times I

used to fancy that money wouldn't prosper. And now that I've handed over principal and interest I'll be bound the receivers will be as ungrateful as most other people upon whom I've conferred benefits."

Mr. Hartley was not to bear all his tribulations so complacently. Day by day he became more suspicious of every one with whom he was connected, and as he could not keep his misgivings to himself, he made confidants of a great many. As no one of his acquaintance had the least sympathy with him—his abandonment of Cecil never being forgotten—his two worthy partners came to learn the estimation in which they were held, and being men sensitive to their own interests, they took sweet counsel together, and arranged that Mr. Hartley should not be guilty of injustice so far as they were concerned. Profiting therefore by occasions and improving opportunities, they swelled their own annual balances at the expense of their old master and present co-partner, taking little pains to conceal their peculations from him,

until he was driven to the verge of madness by the horrible conviction that—to use his own expression—"he was being done brown on all sides."

CHAPTER XII.

TREATS OF MANY MATTERS NECESSARY TO THE
CONCLUSION OF OUR STORY—SOME OF THEM
FORESEEN LONG AGO.

THE death of Bernard was a great sorrow, but like all other great sorrows it was to prove a merciful dispensation of good. Frank missed his little playfellow at morning and evening, and at first could hardly believe that he should hear his prattling voice no more,—look on his bright and beauteous face no more. Sometimes Frank wondered how Ruth could send him forth to his daily business and welcome him on his return with her old familiar smile,—talk so cheerfully during their ordinary converse and so resignedly whenever they spoke of Bernard. He did not then

know the strength of woman's love which could bury its own sorrows in the depths of the heart, lest a show of its own griefs should increase the of him, dear to it as the dead.

Frank had thought often of his last interview with Kate Wycherly, and at times he could not avoid associating the unworthy passion which he had allowed himself to entertain for her, with the loss of his child. He remembered also the bitter truths she had uttered with such unsparing severity ; she had told him how vain and trifling he had ever seemed to her, and but for Ruth's sake he would not have been received even as a friend. Well, he had deserved this censure perhaps, in part ; yet Ruth had loved him in spite of the hard construction of her friend, and loved him still. Frank knew, from a thousand acts, that he was in Ruth's hourly thoughts, and that the business of her life was to make him happy. Vain and selfish, unworthy of regard as he might have been to the proud imperious Kate, and perhaps to others, Ruth acknowledged him to be deserving

of all her love, which seemed,—like jealousy in others,—to grow with what it fed on.

Ruth had given birth to a little girl, and the new blessing was very welcome, but Frank was conscious that it had not the same monopoly of his love that Bernard had had through all his short life, and which for a time seemed to have gone with him to Heaven.

For some time Ruth continued ill—sick almost to death. What if the helpless babe should be deprived of the loving, watchful care of its mother? Who could supply Ruth's place? Who teach it all Bernard's winning ways? Teach it at night and morning to pray for the dear papa who loved so fondly? Bernard's nurse, guardian, and teacher had been Ruth,—what if she should die?

And then Frank sitting lonely in the room which her gentle presence had made home so long, he almost shook with terror as he thought what he should become if she were taken from him. What was it made his fear so powerful? What increased his estimate of her almost unre-

cognised tenderness? Was she to be Loved at Last now that she might be lost to him, although another had come to take the place of Bernard?

He could not endure longer the visions of his solitude, and with beating heart and burning eyes he would have gone to Ruth, as though by keeping watch beside her he hoped to scare away the threatening evil which his terrified imagination pictured as hovering round her.

Ruth was sleeping, and the doctor who sat at her bedside motioned him to go away.

Where?

Not to his own miserable thoughts in the place he had just left. No, he would go up to the chamber wherein his boy had died.

He found Bernard's nurse sitting at the window, and it was evident that she had been crying. Frank asked her wherefore?

"My poor mistress!" said the nurse. "So kind as she has been to all! So much as she has suffered."

"Do you think her in much danger?" asked Frank, scarcely conscious of what he said.

"I fear so indeed, indeed!" replied the nurse. "I warned her of it again and again. I told her that smothering her grief would be sure to tell in time."

"Smothering her grief?" repeated Frank.

"From you, sir; hiding it from you. She knew how dearly you loved our darling Bernard, and she fancied that if you saw her grieving for him, as she did, you would be more unhappy."

"I never suspected this," said Frank, "I thought from the first—thought—" he did not dare to own then how much he had wronged Ruth by suspecting her of indifference.

"Ah! sir," said the nurse. "I've not been without my suspicions that you never knew how dearly, how very dearly mistress loved our darling. From the first hour he was ill she hardly left him; she would let no one sit with him through the night, scarcely in the day, but herself, although I begged her to take rest."

"I thought she slept here, that she might be within call?" said Frank.

"She knew you thought so, and it was a comfort to her that you did not suspect the truth," replied the nurse. "She has never recovered the fatigue of that sad time, and what she has suffered since no one knows besides herself, sir."

"And I believed her to have overcome her sorrow, and never offered the consolation of a loving word, and even suspected her of indifference," thought Frank.

The nurse having gone to a small wardrobe, and opened its folding doors. "Please to look here, sir," she said, and then with a delicacy rather unusual in a person of her condition went to the window.

Frank went to the wardrobe, and on the shelves he saw arranged with the greatest care, by Ruth, little Bernard's toys, and books, and clothes as though he were expected to come back some day and have need of them.

Frank looked long at these hidden treasures of his wife Ruth, connecting them with all that the nurse had told him, until he could see them no longer for the tears of love which welled up from his inmost heart; tears of love for her whom he had so long kept from him by a mystic circle as it were, in which he had resolved to stand alone.

Yes, Ruth—dear, gentle, loving Ruth—was “Loved at Last.”

“She would know it,” Frank thought. “She would know it even if it was decreed that her gentle spirit should go to join her boy. She would know it if she were spared to live for him who knelt and prayed that such mercy would not be withheld.”

Many days and nights of anxious watching passed,

“And death went round about the house
But did not enter in.”

When Ruth sat again in her accustomed place —Frank thankfully regarding her—she seemed

almost like the spirit of herself, so worn and wan had she become. A change to her native air was recommended, and under the care of Mrs. Masham, Ruth went away to the neighbourhood of Hilltown.

Ruth and Kate were soon the friends they were of old, although when Frank Lockyer was expected Miss Wycherly was, strange to say, so engaged that she could not meet him.

It had required three days of unflinching negotiation to bring Mr. Hartley to complete what he had undertaken to perform; and when the necessary documents had been perfected, Cecil turned his thoughts homeward. The only condition he had insisted upon for his own advantage was permission for his sister to correspond with him freely and without question. Mr. Hartley laughed as he granted the request so earnestly made, and made a brutal jest about the cost of the postage.

Cecil arrived half an hour too soon at the sta-

tion whence the train to Hilltown departed. After examining some of the books on the book-stall he made a small purchase, and went into the waiting-room, which was at the time unoccupied. A gentleman who had come to meet the up-train, then nearly due, had observed Cecil very anxiously, as though he was desirous to confirm an impression that they had been known to each other. It was not until Cecil walked towards the waiting-room, his face bent down towards the book he had bought, that the watcher became satisfied of his identity, and following Cecil into the room called him by his name. The voice and form of the speaker were instantly recognised by Cecil, and he and Frank Lockyer once more stood face to face.

“Surely you have not forgotten me, Cecil ?” said Frank, holding out his hand, which the other did not take.

“No, Mr. Lockyer—why should I ?” replied Cecil.

“I guess the cause of your hesitation to take

my hand," said Frank, "but when I have explained——"

"It is not necessary, sir; our relative positions are sufficient explanation," replied Cecil. "You are a prosperous honourable gentleman, and I a returned convict—a man whom it is disgraceful to know except to avoid."

"Cecil, how can you say this to me?" asked Frank.

"It is not I who say it to you," replied Cecil. "It is what you have made me understand too plainly."

"Never!" exclaimed Frank.

"For nearly two long miserable years you have told me this," said Cecil; "told me this by your cruel silence, Frank Lockyer. If you had been, as I have been, the compelled associate of felons and desperate wretches made savage beasts by their miseries and crimes, you would have known what it was to long for the sympathy of honest friends—the shortest intercourse with uncorrupted minds. You professed to be my friend—the hap-

piest memories of my youth were associated with you, and I believed you were my friend—yet you deserted me in my most miserable need; you made me feel my punishment to be almost beyond endurance by your absolute silence; and now, sir, can I take the hand which by a few strokes of a pen could have saved me from almost the bitterness of death? No, sir."

"I knew not of what cruelty I had been guilty in not writing," said Frank. "I never thought I was doing such wickedness—for wickedness it is, and the result of wickedness, as you shall some day know if you care to ask me."

"I am sorry to say that I am indifferent to the past, the present, and the future as they relate to you and myself," replied Cecil. "I loved you very dearly, Frank—I owed you much for your constancy under the sharp trial of your friendship when I stood at the bar of justice; but all is cancelled in my mind by the undeserved neglect of the last few months—so terrible was the misery it occasioned."

"Cecil, this is very painful to bear," said Frank, "very painful to bear, knowing and feeling that I have deserved your reproaches. I can only hope that in time you will forgive me, for, as I live, you are as dear to me as my own life. Let me say this. I wrote to you some months ago, not knowing you were at liberty. My letter was returned, as you were free. I have endeavoured to trace you by all the means in my power—I have been to your father, and all that I could learn from him was that you had written, and that he had refused to receive your letter. His partner had returned it under cover to some public-house near Mucklebridge. I went down there and tried to find traces of you, but without effect. I have desired Ruth, who has been at Hilltown, to find if possible where Jim Perks could be met with."

"The Wycherlys could have told you that," said Cecil curtly.

"I have not seen the Wycherlys for some time," replied Frank, colouring deeply, "although Ruth corresponds with her old friend, and they

have met more frequently of late. I wish I had courage to tell you the cause of my apparent estrangement. It would explain although not excuse my unpardonable neglect of you, Cecil.” Frank after a pause added. “ Cannot you forgive me ? I cannot bear this, Cecil. If you knew what I owe you—more than you can imagine, or how the obligation has been conferred, you would feel how wretched I am made by the knowledge of the suffering I have caused you.”

Cecil turned away to the window, and Frank saw that he was yielding.

“ Cecil—you must forgive me—I see that you are believing what I say—that I have sinned against you without suspecting the cruelty of my neglect. Let old times plead for me, Cecil, old times which have brought about such changes that our lives can never be utterly separated, however we may be estranged, Cecil.”

Old times and the changes which they had brought did plead successfully, and the two friends once more locked their hands together.

"And now, dear Cecil, you must go home with me. You must, old friend, for I will take no denial. I have much to tell you which will make my forgiveness easier to you, and my pardon more acceptable to me. I am waiting the arrival of Ruth and Mrs. Masham from Hilltown,—and there's the train."

Cecil smiled as he replied : "I will go home with you—and Ruth, and Mrs. Masham. They will be surprised to see us together."

And they were surprised—Mrs. Masham particularly ; who, like a remarkable woman as she was, had kept Kate and Cecil's secret locked up so closely in her breast (if that is the place where secrets are confined), that it had never once crept to her lips for utterance.

There was something solemn about the meeting of the two old friends, Frank and Cecil, sundered so long by their strange destinies, as they sat together once again.

Cecil touched lightly upon the sufferings he had undergone, now that he had condoned Frank's

great offence, and spoke hopefully of the future which was before him, although he declined to say how he was occupied, fearing perhaps that Frank might make some suggestion which would be repugnant to his sense of independence.

The twilight had deepened into evening when Frank began his story, and the deep shadows in the room gave him courage to speak boldly.

He told how he had found a seed in his heart which he had mistaken for love, and had encouraged its growth until he discovered it was a deadly plant that would have destroyed him like the impregnated flowers of the olden poisoners—destroyed him and any who should have received it from him. He told this in plainer phrases, and when he spoke of Kate's indignant reproof, he made no betrayal of her love for Cecil.

Frank also confessed that a consciousness of wrong to Cecil, undefined, but yet felt, had made his friendly expressions appear like hypocrisies. He had therefore been silent, and so

his wickedness had been followed with its assured consequences.

Whatever anger Cecil felt at this recital was removed when Frank spoke of his lost child, and how the sorrow which came afterwards had been the means of uniting his heart to Ruth, and when he had finished there was the end of all strife between Saul and Jonathan.

We must gather up a few tangled threads, and then our task will be done.

Mr. Garrett's unexpected accession to fortune nearly turned his ink-striped head (he never changed his pen-wiper), and at length his incipient insanity displayed itself in the form of a love letter to Mrs. Masham. He described in pen and ink a faithful lover gazing despondingly at the portrait of his lady-love hanging above his hearth, when she, the living idol of his heart should be seated in the easy chair on the opposite side of the ingle. He pleaded for companionship and wrote incoherently of buried loves, comparing

them to churchyard cherubim, and concluded by paraphrasing "Affliction sore, long time I bore," signing his epistle with his name, and under-flourishing a true-lover's knot.

Mrs. Masham certainly took a day and a night to consider her answer. It was very short when it was written, and ran as follows :

"DEAR COUSIN JERRY,

"I am and I am not surprised at your letter—surprised that you have been so constant to the woman who jilted you—as I certainly did, loving you a little at the time—and not surprised that such a good kind man as you have ever shown yourself should have overlooked my many faults and asked me to marry him.

I will be more sincere with you than I was some years ago. If I could forget that I was something over fifty years of age, and that you were some few years older, I might have asked my daughter's consent to accept your proposal, but grey locks, pains and cramps, and dim sight

forbid forgetfulness, and therefore, dear Cousin Jerry, although *I own I love you*, I must still remain

HESTER MASHAM.

"There," said the lady, when she had finished her letter, "I have no doubt that it will soften the pain of rejection and be quite as satisfactory as my accepting him, and a great deal less ridiculous.

Mrs. Masham was right in her conjecture. Jerry was made happy in knowing that he was loved at last, and bachelor as he was contrived to enjoy himself to the end of his days.

Mr. Hartley's blindness and the constant irritation which it produced, soon told upon his once iron constitution, and after an obstinate struggle against the orders of his physician he was compelled to keep his bed—his only visitors being his shark-like partners, Messrs. Bosbury and Jones, whom he now hated outrageously. However, he was compelled to dissimulate and receive their

attentions as though he believed in their sincerity—and they in the plentitude of their cupidity ventured at last to suggest to Mr. Hartley the propriety of making his will.

"Make a will! What should he make a will for? He should be up and about in a few days—say a fortnight at most, and then he would exercise his own discretion. If they thought to get him a bargain, damaged though he was, they were mistaken;" and so Messrs. Bosbury and Jones, not perceiving there was anything to be gained by visiting their sick principal at present, kept away for some days altogether.

Time did not improve the condition of Selwyn Hartley, and he thought occasionally that he had better make this will. "What for?" Who did he care to leave his money to? Clara? Pish! he had put by a couple of thousand in notes for her and written her name on the envelope containing them, and that was enough for her—more than he had with her mother. Yet it was respectable to make a will, especially when you have some-

thing like a balance to leave. And, by-the-by—why had he never thought of that before ?—If he were to die intestate, Cecil—that scoundrel who had robbed him of so many thousands, would inherit his dirty money. Would he ? Not if he could help it; but to whom—to what should he leave it ? Messrs. Bosbury and Jones proposed to themselves to answer Mr. Hartley's question. They knew how friendless their old principal was, and determined to profit if they could by his isolation. With that intention they had done their best to keep alive Mr. Hartley's ill-feeling towards Cecil, fearing that a reconciliation might interfere with their own interests. Mr. Hartley was evidently “on the go” (as Mr. Bosbury elegantly and feelingly expressed his condition); and as he had passed two or three wretched nights and days, the necessity increased, it was thought, for urging on the performance of the testamentary act. Messrs. Bosbury and Jones accordingly visited Suburban Square together, their usual practice being, as they said, “to

relieve guard over the old gentleman, so that no undue influence should be exercised upon him by any outsider.'

"Here's Jones and me come to see you, Mr. Hartley," said Bosbury, in rather a loud tone, as though to rouse the slumbering energies of the blind sick man.

"Both of you—what's that for?" asked Hartley, sitting up in bed. "Who's minding business in the City?"

"Oh, that can take care of itself for a time," replied Bosbury; "and we shan't stay, I expect, more than a quarter of an hour. But there's a matter that's pressing, and we thought you would like us both to be present whilst it was talked over."

"What is it?" asked Hartley impatiently.

"Well, sir," said Mr. Bosbury, taking a seat by the bedside, "I'm afraid you won't think it one of the pleasantest communications you ever had from me—I don't think so myself, but I am sure you are too much a man of the world not

to see we are only doing our duty by you in making it."

"What the deuce is it?" replied Hartley
"What are you beating about the bush for?—
speak out!"

"Very well, sir, since you wish it," said Bosbury. "I have had—and so has Mr. Jones here had—several interviews with your medical friend——"

"What right had you to do that?" asked Hartley, with his old impatient manner.

"Because we thought it our duty to do so, sir," replied Mr. Bosbury, with deep feeling, receiving an approving nod from Mr. Jones, who stood clasping the bed-post.

"We saw, sir," continued Bosbury, "that you was not improving in health, sir; that every week you seemed to be going down, down, as one may say; and having so many interests of ours mixed up with yours, we are naturally anxious to have all matters put straight before —before——'

"Before what, sir?" cried Hartley, opening his sightless eyeballs to the utmost.

"Well, sir, before you are incapable of knowing what you are about," said Bosbury, putting the catastrophe he was expecting in the mildest form of words which occurred to him.

"Oh, that's what you mean?" replied Hartley, lying down again. "You want me to make my will, I suppose."

"Exactly, sir," said Jones, releasing the post and going on the opposite side of the bed to that where Bosbury was seated.

The partners seemed like two Evil Influences waiting upon Selwyn Hartley.

"Well, and what do you expect for your share of the 'plunder?'" asked Hartley, showing his teeth.

"We have not given that a thought—have we Jones?" said Bosbury, making a grimace; "but as you ask the question perhaps you can answer it, sir?"

"My share of the business, of course," said Hartley; "that you expect, I suppose?"

Bosbury and Jones both expressed their satisfaction at such a bequest.

"And the money I have in the concern—that I presume would be convenient?" said Hartley.

Bosbury and Jones could only express their thanks for such consideration.

"My daughter Clara ought to have something—say two thousand. A larger fortune might make her a tempting bait for some fortune-hunting scoundrel," said Hartley,

Bosbury and Jones quite agreed that a large fortune exposed its possessor, if a woman, to the designs of the unprincipled members of the community.

"Then my residuary legatees might be the two friends now sitting or standing by my bedside," said Hartley, again showing his teeth. "But who to appoint as my executor?"

Mr. Jones ventured to suggest that Mr. Bosbury's brother, the rising attorney, might undertake that responsible office.

When Mr. Jones had made this suggestion,

Mr. Hartley broke into a loud laugh—a terrible laugh, without one note of mirthfulness, but which sounded like the mocking of a fiend.

“And so, gentlemen,” said Hartley, again sitting up in his bed, “you think me such an old blind idiot that you can lead me as you please—bamboozle me out of my money, and dance on my grave when I am gone! Do you think I would trust you with the making of my will—or leave you, who have robbed me since I have lost my eyes, one shilling more of my money? Trust *you* with the making my will!”

“And why not?” asked Bosbury, maddened by the trick which had been played upon him. “Do you think we’d risk transportation, and get you to sign a wrong one? I know such things have been done, but we are too well off for that.”

Had Bosbury struck Hartley a blow, the blind man could not have fallen back more suddenly or have cried out louder.

“Leave me—get out—where’s Clara? Here, turn these ruffians into the street”—and Messrs.

Bosbury and Jones, thoroughly amazed and disgusted, went their way to the City, resolved, after a brief conversation, to take care of themselves in their peculiar departments whilst they had the power of doing so.

What had struck Hartley down when Bosbury spoke of substituting one will for another?—not remorse for Hartley's own treachery to his Uncle Selwyn and the wrong to his cousins—no—he had condoned all that, principal and interest, and on that score his conscience should be at ease;—no, it was not remorse. Neither was it shame that Bosbury might now suspect what had been done at Ashtree Farm years before, that had struck him down and made him rave as he had done;—it was a sudden thought begotten of Bosbury's words—a belief that owing to his blindness such treachery might be practised on himself—that he might leave his wealth to some one he hated, like—Cecil perhaps—or the two men who were trying to get him in their snare.

Why had he lost his sight? Why was he

thus cruelly afflicted when he had more need of his eyes than ever?—when he had to count the harvest of his tricky, lying life, and enjoy the only pleasure which remained to him? He would sign nothing. Then came the distressing thought that if he should die intestate, Cecil—the stubborn son who had scorned his father, and thought forgery less disgraceful than union with him—would inherit all.

Never! never! Cecil should not have his money. Yet he had no one in whom he could confide, no one who would not deceive the old blind man as he himself had deceived his uncle when blind with the mists of approaching death. O Selwyn Hartley! in vain you gnash those teeth of which you were so proud! In vain you tear your irreverent locks grown white in wickedness! You have lived only for yourself, had no love, no friendship, but for yourself, and find what a sorry comforter you have provided for your hour of need.

The improbable treachery which Hartley had

imagined haunted him continually, until he regarded it as a certain consequence should he confide in any one about him; and yet it was a distressing thought that Cecil might inherit all. Sometimes his mutterings were almost ludicrous, connected with the gravity of the matter which occupied his thoughts.

Sometimes he inclined to hospitals, but he'd never had any benefit from them—no hospitals for him! To the Royal Humane Society? No—they'd once saved a man from drowning who had deposited money in Hartley's hands on an I O U. If he hadn't been fished up for some days the memorandum would have been illegible—no R. H. S. for him! He hit it at last—the Chancellor of the Exchequer, towards the extinction of the National Debt! But from this act of insanity he was saved by his procrastination and mistrust of everybody necessary to carry out his patriotic intentions, and after lingering many weeks he became aware that he was dying. Conscious to the last—conscious that he should

die intestate, and that his ill-gotten wealth would pass to his long-disinherited son.

It did. The accession of wealth helped to prove that Cecil's better nature had been preserved through all the bitter experiences of his past life; and, true-hearted gentleman that he was, the money he had so acquired was made to atone for some of the evil committed in its attainment, by being applied to wise and charitable uses. When Clara married she had a better portion than the one her father had assigned to her.

Nor were the faithful services of Jim Perks left unrewarded. The charcoal burner's fire was extinguished, and less arduous employment found for him in the house of his master and friend, Cecil Hartley.

Much of Kate Wycherly's youth had faded from her face, and there were silver threads in her dark hair, when her father's death left her free to become Cecil's wife if so be he willed it. The long-parted lovers had maintained a know-

ledge of each other through those friends who were known to both, and their love had grown stronger for the probation to which it had been subjected.

Cecil, for Kate's sake more than his own, made his home in a distant part of England and when it was ready, waiting the coming of its mistress, Kate came and married the man she had loved so truly.

They married in the autumn of their lives, making for themselves a golden harvest of good deeds, and applying the knowledge they had gained of human error and of human suffering to stimulate them to the exercise of charitable forbearance and active benevolence. At times, when some events of the past were remembered, a quiet sadness would take possession of Cecil, as though he mistrusted his right to accept the blessings which surrounded him; but Kate was ever by his side to lead him to the consideration of his own worthiness which had won her love, which had been coveted by so many—

that love which had not wavered through all his trials, and which through all the remaining changes of their lives would continue faithful to the last.

So ends our story.

THE END.

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